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Jay C. Knodle

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The Influence of John Dewey in Higher Education

By JAY C. KNODE

Reformers often suffer from the enthusiasms of their disciples. Obviously, every reformer must say things emphatically, sometimes over-emphatically, in order to command the attention of his public; and he makes his points in the light of his own background, which is not the background of the succeeding generation. He may be broad-minded, humane, and, although fired by an unquenchable zeal (if he is to carry his reform to fruition), still possessed of a genuine sense of the proper limitations of his project. But, too often, the men who follow him feel themselves hedged about by no such restrictions. Generally, these extremists may be placed in one of two categories. Either they are bitterenders, interested in following their premises into every remote corner of life, or they are like suddenly released prisoners, throwing all restraint—and any values it may foster—to the wind, glorying only in a new "freedom." Evidence is not lacking to show that their extravagances are sometimes a source of embarrassment to the original progenitor of their doctrine.

For many years, John Dewey has been the center of a militant reform movement in American education. Sometimes his long and difficult philosophical disquisitions have hidden his militancy, but throughout his writing Dewey has aimed to lay the logical basis of social reconstruction. Nothing said here should be construed as defense of the errors in education against which Dewey went forth to battle. He attacked formalism; he attacked static classicism; he attacked what has been called the "miniature-adult fallacy"—regarding children as simply small editions of grown-ups; he attacked education because it did not sense its rôle in the building of true democracy; he attacked its lack of creativeness, its lack of practicality, its lack of freedom. And these
attacks have brought about many excellent results in elementary and secondary education. Their effects in higher education, however, are of a more questionable nature.

Dewey’s erudition is broad and profound. He came to maturity during the last half of the nineteenth century when mechanistic science reached its zenith, and he could say: “The method we term ‘scientific’ forms for the modern man ... the sole dependable means of disclosing the realities of existence. It is the sole authentic mode of revelation.” Yet the breadth of his outlook had permitted him to write only a year or so earlier: “Were it possible for me to be a devotee of any system, I should still believe there is greater richness and greater variety of insight in Hegel than in any other single systematic philosopher—though when I say this I include Plato, who still provides my favorite philosophic reading.” It is to be observed, too, that Dewey has given increasing attention, in recent years, to the subjects of art and religion. A few years ago, his work was attacked because it seemed to ignore too completely certain esthetic and religious values, but his more recent series of lectures have at least attempted to meet this criticism. As he himself has pointed out, he received an early grounding in idealism and, though he later abandoned it for positivism and instrumentalism, he can never be the same sort of instrumentalist as some of the younger men who have matured intellectually without such footing. Nevertheless, Dewey has poured all his tremendous creative energy into the building of an instrumental philosophy—one which conceives the mind, consciousness, the reasoning ability, and every other ability possessed by the human organism as instruments for meeting and mastering the problems set by environment, or one which says, in the words of James: “... ideas (which are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience.”

This creed may be called humanism, but it is the scientific humanism of F. C. S. Schiller and Auguste Comte, not
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the literary "new" humanism of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. And it is an empirical humanism, which has an ancient and honorable lineage, to be traced through such illustrious names as Spencer, Hume, Locke, Francis Bacon, and Roger Bacon, and back through the Moors to the Greeks, among whom Protagoras insisted on bringing philosophy down from the clouds and making "man the measure of all things." Some of these men sought, through a kind of dualistic philosophy, to introduce a place for God in the universe, but Dewey has been consistent in emphasizing the unity of human experience as well as its finality. Even his naturalism is so completely man-centered that it has caused Santayana to protest: "Pragmatism may be regarded as ... the most close-reefed of philosophical craft, most tightly hugging appearance, use, and relevance to practice today and here, least drawn by the lure of speculative distances. Nor would Dewey, I am sure, or any other pragmatist, ever be a naturalist instinctively or on the wings of speculative insight, like the old Ionians or the Stoics or Spinoza, or like those many mystics, Indian, Jewish, or Mohammedan, who, heartily despising the foreground, have fallen in love with the greatness of nature and have sunk speechless before the infinite."

There is no question that Dewey is deeply concerned about the foreground. And there is a sense in which this is a typically American kind of philosophy. It would be unfair to impute shortsightedness to Dewey; he has advocated social reforms which in the minds of most of us should have long-range beneficial effects; but the whole instrumental philosophy emphasizes the here and now, to the exclusion of metaphysical and, traditional considerations. Life consists, through the instrumentality of science and practical experimentation, of the solution of problems, the pragmatist argues. These problems are forever shifting, hence continuously immediate and continuously calling for action. Woe to that man dependent upon worn-out formulas or sunk into routine before the constantly new challenges of his environ-
ment! So, for the pioneer, for the practical man, for the "man of affairs" this sort of thing, of course, sounds very much like good common sense. Once more, it brings philosophy down to earth; it does not wander into vague ontologies or axiologies or nebulous speculations; and American education has found it most stimulating. Yet some of us will ask the privilege of making reservations and amendments.

Attention will be directed here to four emphases in education which may be said to derive from Dewey's work, namely, those upon activity, upon creativeness, upon social values, and upon experience.

First, Dewey combats the old idea of the child as a receptacle into which facts are to be poured. Under such a theory the only function of the "educand" is to absorb information, to give proof of adeptness at deglutition. This old conceit became not only ludicrous but tragic; it had to be destroyed. But the supposedly compensating educational movement for "activities" has also assumed extreme versions. "Doing things" for the average citizen means making a stir, physical activity, something that can always be observed objectively. And this concept runs squarely into difficulty in higher education, where as one ascends the scale the process may become less and less objective. Such a statement is not to question the familiar "No psychosis without a corresponding neurosis" nor to belittle the essential role of expression in all achievement. Rather, it emphasizes the fact that there are different phases of mental life. The trouble with the enthusiasts for activity seems to lie in a tendency to forget that ultimately all objective experience has to be integrated and evaluated subjectively.

In a recent textbook on secondary education the authors quote the following sentence from Dewey's *Democracy and Education*: "... mind is not a name for something complete by itself; it is a name for a course of action in so far as that is intelligently directed; in so far, that is to say, as aims, ends enter into it with selection of means to further the attainment of aims." At the head of the next paragraph
the authors place one phrase: "Mind is a course of action." They then proceed to elaboration of this idea without reference to the additional point that Dewey clearly makes: Mind is also a center of integration, of the evaluation of goals, of the selection of both ends and means. In this text I am able to find just one-half page in praise of what might be called the "inner life." The authors do not call it that, and my guess is that such a phrase would rouse in them a good deal of scorn. "Inner life" might be interpreted as "bookish," and there is scarcely a word that stirs the ire of these educators to so thoroughly an apoplectic state as the word "bookish."

It is this kind of emphasis in secondary schools that leads, in part, to the belief that extra-classroom activities are the really important thing in education. Perhaps it is one reason, also, why the country as a whole is having another renascence of athletics in a frame of mind, apparently, that once did obeisance to the name of Barnum, but now worships at the shrine of Hollywood. This is the cult of activity at its apex, we should say. Such furthering of "activities" may be good business, for business in many people's minds is a process of strenuous hustling, amassing, and publicizing. Nevertheless, the whole procedure is certainly cast in quantitative terms, or if in qualitative terms, those that deal with physical, not intellectual, standards. But higher education, in its upper levels, by its very nature and constitution, is concerned with superlative quality, with the highest reaches of mind and spirit, with the type of problems that few can comprehend or master. John Dewey would never argue such a point. Nevertheless, this doctrine of "activity" in the hands of some school people becomes a forthright attack upon spiritual and intellectual quality.

A second of Dewey's emphases—and one related to the first-named—is upon social problems. Projects looking in this direction once appeared so valuable that it was difficult, perhaps, to see the dangers lurking in the shadows. But these menaces begin to raise their heads. Higher education
in the minds of some educators can become almost completely a social, never an intellectual, exercise. (It is obvious that the issue here is the sensitive one of humanism versus humanitarianism, but there is no dodging it.) Into modern higher education has come more and more of the dominance of men who regard it the prime business of the college to produce personality, "mixing-ability," leadership in terms of "influencing people." Part of this derives from denominational colleges, part of it from American politics, part of it from American ideas of publicity, some phases of it from socially ambitious parents; but part of it comes from secondary school leaders, who, fortified by the emphases of Dewey, cry out against the intellectual. Educational administration calls for business ability and political ability, apparently in increasing degree. Presumably, men with these qualities in such positions are interested also in scholarship; but their behavior is not reassuring. Their reckoning seems always to be in terms of numbers and mass reactions. Some school principals frankly say that they are much more concerned about the lower half of their classes (ascertained on the basis of academic achievement) than about the upper half. And in support of their position they cite the good American educational doctrine that every student is entitled to opportunity up to the measure of his ability. This rule, however, works both ways. The lower half certainly must not be neglected; but, by the same token, neither must the upper half. One sometimes encounters in school men so much hostility to any scheme looking to the improvement of scholarship that the suspicion is aroused that it may spring from fear rather than from mere inertia.

Dewey's philosophy often lends itself to the support of practicality. "An ounce of experience," he has said, "is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance." Again, in his effort to escape educational dualisms he insists that education must have its vocational aspects. To be sure, he is fearful of the deterioration of vocational education into
mere trade education; he is fearful of emphasis upon monetary rewards as the goal of such education; and he is fearful that it may be limited in meaning to the production of tangible commodities. Dewey is really concerned with the tremendously social significance of vocation; nevertheless, his writing can be made to serve the purposes of the anti-intellectual who either refuses, or lacks the ability, to follow an exposition of vocation in its broader implications.

Furthermore, Dewey's wholehearted espousal of democratic ideals expresses itself in aversion to any doctrine of human inequality. "The idea of abstract, universal superiority and inferiority," he declares, "is an absurdity." And, elsewhere, he amplifies this statement, explaining: "The level of action fixed by embodied intelligence is always the important thing .... A more intelligent state of social affairs, one more informed with knowledge, more directed by intelligence, would not improve original endowments one whit, but it would raise the level upon which the intelligence of all operates. The height of this level is much more important for judgment of public concerns than are differences in intelligence quotients."

This kind of statement, coupled with a manifest dislike for anything which might be interpreted as the conceit of an intellectual class (no love was ever lost between the Babbitt-More humanists and John Dewey), seemingly ranges Dewey on the side of anti-intellectual education. But it is another case of confusion from too broad a generalization. When Dewey says a high level of general public intelligence is good for judgment of public concerns, there is not much to be said in refutation. But in certain areas of public welfare, it can also be maintained that the intelligence quotient is the most important element involved. Personally, I prefer to travel over bridges built by men who have both social intelligence and a mastery of engineering techniques; I prefer to employ a physician who is both socially informed and master of the scientific knowledge of his field. Certain engineers, physicians, lawyers, preachers and teachers can
do and are doing incalculable damage in America today, not because they are dishonest or victims of social lag, but because they do not have the intellectual power requisite for their field. Some kinds of work not only invite intellectual quality, they demand it. Nor will any emphasis upon "embodied intelligence" replace it. College administrators are devoting much time nowadays to methods of dealing with students who have never learned the meaning of intellectual mastery, have never tasted its satisfaction, and who, indeed, either regard it scornfully, as "highbrow," or dazedly, as something beyond their ken. And all this may be said without even mentioning advances into realms of pure knowledge and expression from which there is no immediate prospect of deriving practical applications.

It is time we, in America, do some straight thinking about higher learning. Back in the days of the founding of Harvard College it was accepted as a necessity. Whatever the vices of the early Puritans may have been, disregard for scholarship was not among them. A great scholar of his time —John Milton—was foreign secretary under Oliver Cromwell, an office that involved carrying on all correspondence with other nations in Latin. But since the time of the early Puritans, science has deeply affected the outlook of both educated and uneducated men. Its offspring, technology, has changed not only men's outlooks but their very mode of living. And the theories of democracy continued to spread from the period of the seventeenth century up into the twentieth. In America, the continent has been conquered, tremendous national and individual wealth built up, and a new high in standards of living achieved. It is not strange, therefore, that Americans, as a nation, today, are largely of the opinion that those things make most difference (a pragmatic criterion of truth) which have to do with material affairs. They have made the most obvious differences in the past three hundred years. So, today, with this background, the average man will regard any withdrawal from "affairs" as queer, if not actually suspicious. Even research men in
science need huge salaries to gain wide respect. They may not be regarded as leaders, forsooth, though their findings revolutionize men's ways of living! We lose sight of the fact that the ideas of the face-to-face leader are seldom original. The seer, the artist, the theorist have done the real adventuring in the world of thought; our notion that real leadership resides only in oratory and politics is both naïve and childish. There seems to be a growing conviction, especially among some of our young men concerned with problems of government, that ideas always follow action, that any "successful" action will subsequently be philosophized into a status of permanent propriety. However, our constant reference, as Americans, to men like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln is not merely to their contemporary success; it is a recognition of the universality of their ideas. Great thinking and great principles echo down through time, not because they have served as efficient rationalization for certain deeds, but because, though often invoked, they are never completely fulfilled, remaining still to challenge us.

The prophet's observation about people who perish because they have no vision is still apt. It is pretty generally agreed that during this era upon which the world is entering, democracy will face its supreme tests. Under those circumstances we may incline more than ever to think of life only as something immediate, but crises sometimes develop aftermaths intense enough to impel men to face life in terms of final meanings. Then, ideas, as ideas, may grow into new significance. If the approaching crisis brings about some such revival, its tragedies will have been, at least partially, ameliorated. As Whitehead, dealing with recent advances of science, has pointed out: "The paradox is now fully established that the utmost abstractions are the true weapons with which to control our thought of concrete fact."

Somewhere in the American educational system, if our civilization is to be conserved and propagated, this pursuit of ideas—abstract, scientific, social, speculative, and beautiful—must be stimulated. The old and great must be pre-
served, the new investigated, the two given relation. But the higher reaches of this scale are obviously to be explored by limited numbers, and this fact is the source of so much of our confusion. Many times, when Dewey talks about education, he is speaking in terms of the lower levels. In those groups, insistence upon activity—social or other—will likely do more good than harm; but, too often, in dealing with education, we speak of all students at all levels at once. Professor H. H. Horne has observed significantly that Dewey, in his own lectures on philosophy, used the most formal of methods and materials, far removed from progressivism.

The third, and perhaps the most tragic, distortion of Dewey's doctrines results, largely, from his emphasis upon the encouragement of originality and the furthering of the student's growth through his own interests. Nothing could be sounder than the original doctrine. But it has been carried to such lengths that some teachers become fearful of imposing any task or any discipline that does not spring spontaneously out of the whims of the child. One result has been that when faced with plain work, without the appearance of special interest, young people with such training look to someone to make it intriguing. This leads directly, of course, into the current controversy between "essentialists" and "progressivists" in education. But the writer is not worried by the practices of good progressive schools. The danger, again, comes from the pseudo-reformer, the rationalizer who can turn his own distaste for hard intellectual work into a conviction that such work has a really deleterious effect upon young people. Carry such a perversion into higher education, and the inevitable outcome is both mental and moral flabbiness. Undoubtedly, the present rush of students into secondary and college levels calls with increasing insistence for re-statement of the purposes of higher education in a democracy. But whatever ideas appear in these new appraisals, certainly softness, sentimentality, and mere glamour will not be upheld and encouraged. Good college teachers, of course, can, and do, make their courses
interesting; but good teachers have learned, also, through long travail, to believe heartily in the maxim that you get out of exercise what you put into it.

Moreover, it is a common observation that the majority of students have more respect for, and carry away a deeper regard for, the school situation in which a definite morale has been established by a self-respecting faculty than from the strive-to-please-at-any-price atmosphere. Students like teachers who, in a firm and dignified manner, show that they are superior to those whom they teach. But this conscious superiority of teachers depends upon many factors, including intellectual achievement, continuous growth, definite objectives, the respect of the community, and, not least, confidence in the support of administrative departments. It is hardly strange that, deprived of the two last-named factors, thousands of teachers are aligning themselves with labor unions—a pretty measure of the general respect for education in America!

Bertrand Russell, an "advanced" educational thinker, has said: "Difficult success as an ideal should be present to the mind of the young if they are not to become wayward and futile. But there are few to whom it will occur in an environment where freedom is absolute." And Dewey also has found it necessary to strike out at some of the nonsense preached in the name of freedom. "In some progressive schools," he writes, "the fear of adult imposition has become a veritable phobia. . . . In criticizing the progressive schools, as I have indicated already, it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations. But some of these schools indulge pupils in unrestrained freedom of action and speech, of manners and lack of manners. Schools farthest to the left (and there are many parents who share the fallacy) carry the thing they call freedom to the point of anarchy."

The fourth and final emphasis here considered is one that Dewey is directly responsible for, since he is one of the most consistent positivists of modern times. Standing upon his own idealistic training he has fought long and valorously
against the stultifying influences of authoritarianism, maintaining that man's only authority is his own experience, and his only road to authority is science. Dewey is afraid of the play of the imagination upon the meaning of the universe, because imagination has so often caught men in a tissue of enduring falsehood. The only safe approach, therefore, must be relativistic. Now, for a John Dewey or anyone else having his acquaintance, or half his acquaintance, with the thought of the past, this is not a dangerous attitude. But most of our people in education have no such background; and indications are not lacking that, among certain of our scientifically-minded men of the younger generation, a thorough-going relativism has been adopted that lies only one step away from that extreme form of skepticism which holds: "Man can have no real knowledge of the universe; his explanations of things are always silly. So why worry about meanings or rules of any kind?" Ethically, the implications of this doctrine are portentous. Of course, the positivistic answer is that once man accepts science and the objective data of his own experience as final, he will lose all superstitious regard for so-called ultimate principles, and will live for the sake of values that man can demonstrably evolve. But even Thomas Huxley was ready to admit that man is a metaphysical animal. The human family has not only repudiated extreme skepticism in the past; it has refused to live with it. And as long as the race is comprised of beings like its present members, the race will continue to react in this way.

At the back of his book, America in Search of Culture, W. A. Orton has placed a series of reproductions of American art. Examples of portraiture include "Samuel Mifflin," by Peals; "Mrs. Bourne," and "Judge Sherbourne," by Copley; and "The Thinker," by Eakins. Above the plates the comment, quoted from the text, runs: "... these strongly conceived, strongly limned men and women of the eighteenth century—full of vigor and idiosyncrasy—are sure of themselves (too sure, perhaps!) as the subjects of modern
portraitists are not.” The significance of this excerpt lies in its last phrase. We modern men and women are not sure of ourselves. We struggle in an era lying between the authority of theology and a new authority, perhaps science. However, science has gone a very little way in the appraisal of human values. In such a situation, it is easy to slip over into a skeptical attitude toward all truth and all value. But it is dangerous. And one of the best ways of reducing its danger is to allow free play of metaphysical imagination, so long as it starts out from premises that do not violate the present findings of science. Some of these imaginings will be found untenable, of course; some may inveigle men into temporary error; but the errors of pure cynical skepticism are worse.

Education in general will necessarily employ a metaphysics that takes off from and includes both science and society. Education, for the very reason that it is an institution, not a mere doctrine, must assume and preserve a vigorous liberalism, if it is to survive. It must be concerned both with potential men of affairs and with potential synthesists and creators. The danger is not in including the former; the danger is that we ignore the latter; and Dewey’s emphases are being used quite too markedly in one direction. Thus, John Dewey’s teaching, in its relation to American higher education, confirms once more the well-known fact that reforms may come to need reforming.