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John Dewey: The Editor's Appreciation

JO ANN BOYDSTON

When John Dewey was born in 1859, there were in this country some men, and a few women, who were philosophers, teachers of philosophy, and students of philosophy, but these people could not teach or study American philosophy because there was no body of thought that could be called "American philosophy." Half a century later, we did have an identifiable "American" philosophy and much that is distinctive about it we owe to John Dewey. In fact, by 1920, when Dewey was sixty-one years old, Morris Raphael Cohen was able to say, "John Dewey is unquestionably the one preeminent figure in American philosophy; and if there could be such an office as that of national philosopher, no one else could properly be mentioned for it."¹ The key word here is of course "national," because Dewey has long been considered the most American of the American philosophers and frequently called "the philosopher of democracy." To bring the record up to date, and to underline the national character of Dewey's philosophy, I should add that Dewey is obviously the only American in the group named by Richard Rorty a few years ago as "the three most important philosophers of our century"—Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey.²

What kind of man was this great philosopher? I would like for you to know John Dewey as I have come to know him, both as philosopher and as person, chiefly through his own words and the words of others who knew him well.

It is illuminating to trace Dewey's steps from his undergraduate days at the University of Vermont, where he was an indifferent student up to his last year. As a senior, he was introduced to mental and moral philosophy, and what was then called social and political philosophy—actually more in the nature of history of civilization and constitutional law. He brought his grades up enough to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa. But when he graduated at the age of twenty, he did not quite know what to do with his life. He took a job that a relative helped him find teaching Latin, algebra, and the natural sciences in the Oil City, Pennsylvania, high



John Dewey (1937) by Diego Rivera (Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale).

school, and somehow during his two years there, he found time to write a philosophical essay that he diffidently sent to William Torrey Harris, the editor of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, published in St. Louis, which was "the only philosophic journal in the country at that time, as [Harris] and his group formed almost the only group of laymen devoted to philosophy for non-theological reasons."³ Dewey wrote Harris, "An opinion as to whether you consider it to show ability enough of any kind to warrant my putting much of my time on that sort of subject would be thankfully received and, as I am a young man in doubt about how to employ my reading hours, might be of much advantage."⁴ Before he heard from Harris about this essay,

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Dewey went back to Charlotte, Vermont, to teach in high school and do some private philosophical study. From Charlotte, Dewey sent Harris a second essay. We do not know what Harris finally replied,⁵ but Dewey said later that Harris's "reply was so encouraging that it was a distinct factor in deciding me to try philosophy as a professional career,"⁶ and we also know that the essays appeared in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Dewey's first published efforts. It now seems fortunate indeed that Dewey made these tentative moves toward a career in philosophy rather than in high school teaching, for which he seems not to have been particularly well suited—for years later, one of Dewey's students at Charlotte recalled "how terribly the boys behaved, and how long and fervent was the prayer with which he opened each school day."⁷

Having brushed up on philosophical German, and having decided to pursue graduate study in philosophy, young Dewey was urged to go to Germany where—everybody advised him—the important work in philosophy was being done. He already knew, however, that he wanted to stay in this country, even though as he said later, "Teachers of philosophy were at that time, almost to a man, clergymen; the supposed requirements of religion, or theology, dominated the teaching of philosophy in most colleges"⁸—and he was sure that the ministry was not his calling. So he followed his brother to the new graduate school that had been established specifically for scientific research—the Johns Hopkins University. At the age of twenty-three, Dewey went to Baltimore where he found at Johns Hopkins what Herbert Schneider has described as "a group of enthusiastic promoters of the science of the mind. There was to be a genetic logic, a Darwinian science of the emotions, an evolutionary science of the development of the human senses and mental powers, a science of morals, and in general an extension of the theory of life to the theory of culture."⁹ These are exactly the strains that characterized Dewey's philosophy throughout the rest of his life.

In 1884, Ph.D. degree in hand, Dewey accepted the invitation of his Johns Hopkins mentor George Sylvester Morris to go as an instructor to the University of Michigan, where he kept an unbelievable schedule of activities, an early indication of his lifelong self-discipline. Here is the way Dewey spent his time between September 1884 and November 1886: he had a regular teaching schedule; he was active in the Philosophical Society, presenting papers and discussing others; he spoke and wrote for the Students' Christian Association; he faithfully attended the First Congregational Church, taught a Bible class, and took part in church business meetings; he was on the University Visitation Team that accredited high schools throughout the state; he was a charter member of the Michigan Schoolmas-

ters' Club, which he frequently addressed and which he served as vice president; he published eleven scholarly articles; he was promoted to Assistant Professor; he met, courted, and married Alice Chipman; and he wrote his first book, *Psychology*, published in 1886,¹⁰ when he was all of twenty-seven years old. Small wonder that even at that age, he had apparently gained something of a reputation for absentmindedness. We know this now because in 1935, the officers of that Michigan Schoolmasters' Club invited Dewey to return for the club's fiftieth anniversary, mentioning that some in the group remembered how he had wheeled one of his children in a buggy when he went to the bank, had left the buggy outside the bank and gone inside to take care of business, and walked away leaving the baby—buggy and all—sitting in front of the bank. Dewey graciously declined the invitation, adding that when *he* went to Ann Arbor the faculty were telling the baby-buggy story about Dr. Havershill, and that he really had hoped after all this time people would be telling it about somebody besides him.

The arena for and the scope of Dewey's activities were greatly enlarged when he moved in 1894 to the University of Chicago, where he was to spend the next ten years, and where he began to develop the outlines of his own philosophy. He said, "As my study and thinking progressed, I became more and more troubled by the intellectual scandal that seemed to me involved in the current (and traditional) dualism in logical standpoint and method between something called 'science' on the one hand and something called 'morals' on the other. I have long felt that the construction of a logic, that is, a method of effective inquiry, which would apply without abrupt breach of continuity to the fields designated by both these words, is at once our needed theoretical solvent and the supply of our greatest practical want."¹¹ When he moved to Chicago, he did not transfer his long-standing membership in the Congregational Church, signaling a clear break with his traditional strict religious upbringing.

By 1903, the main direction of Dewey's philosophy could be seen in the work entitled *Studies in Logical Theory*, a volume published by the students and faculty of the department under Dewey's leadership. William James considered this work such a landmark that right after reading it, he wrote to F. C. S. Schiller that "it is splendid stuff, and Dewey is a hero. A real school and real thought. At Harvard we have plenty of thought, but not [a] school. At Yale and Cornell, the other way about."¹²

It was also in Chicago that Dewey worked closely with the three women to whose "character and intelligence," he attributed "much of his enthusiasm in the support of every cause that enlarged the freedom of activity"¹³—Alice Chipman Dewey; Jane Addams, and

Ella Flagg Young. Young was the first woman superintendent of schools of Chicago (or of any major city in the country) as well as the first woman president of the National Education Association; she worked with Dewey in the University of Chicago department of pedagogy, and it was she who—along with Alice Chipman Dewey—“supplemented Dewey’s educational ideas where he lacked experience in matters of practical administration, crystallizing his ideas of democracy in the school and, by extension, in life.”¹⁴ Dewey said of Jane Addams: “I have learned many things from Jane Addams. One of the things that I have learned from her is the enormous value of mental non-resistance, of tearing away the armor-plate of prejudice, of convention, isolation that keeps one from sharing to the full in the larger and even the more unfamiliar and alien ranges of the possibilities of human life and experience.”¹⁵

Then, just one year after the *Studies in Logical Theory* appeared, Dewey went to Columbia University, where he spent most of his career—from 1905 until his retirement in 1930. At Columbia University, Dewey’s philosophical thought flowered. He constantly worked on new lines: as he wrote, in his only autobiographical piece: “I envy, up to a certain point, those who can write their intellectual biography in a unified pattern, woven out of a few distinctly discernible strands of interest and influence. By contrast, I seem to be unstable, chameleon-like, yielding one after another to many diverse and even incompatible influences; struggling to assimilate something from each and yet striving to carry it forward in a way that is logically consistent with what has been learned from its predecessors.”¹⁶ We can say that the predominant strain in that development was Dewey’s effort to show that an “instrumentalist” or “experimentalist” logic is essential to the human as well as to the natural sciences. Although Dewey has been identified chiefly with American pragmatism, he preferred to call his own approach “experimentalism” or “instrumentalism.” Here are a few characteristic statements:

“Experimental method is not just messing around nor doing a little of this and a little of that in the hope that things will improve. Just as in the physical sciences, it implies a coherent body of ideas, a theory, that gives direction to effort.”¹⁷

“There is but one sure road of access to truth—the road of patient, co-operative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection.”¹⁸

“Since scientific methods simply exhibit free intelligence operating in the best manner available at a given time, the cultural waste, confusion, and distortion that result from the failure to use these methods, in all fields in connection with all problems is incalculable.”¹⁹

“Ready-made rules available at a moment’s notice for

settling any kind of moral difficulty and resolving every species of moral doubt have been the chief object of the ambition of moralists. In the much less complicated and less changing matters of bodily health such pretensions are known as quackery.”²⁰

However, I especially like Dewey’s simple definition of pragmatism: “The term ‘pragmatic’ means only the rule of referring all thinking, all reflective considerations, to *consequences* for final meaning and test.” He went on to say that these consequences to which all thinking should be referred were not narrowly defined; rather, “they may be esthetic, or moral, or political, or religious in quality.”²¹

When Bertrand Russell likened Dewey’s variety of pragmatism to commercialism, saying in effect that it was vulgar in a typically American way, Dewey responded as follows: “The suggestion that pragmatism is the intellectual equivalent of commercialism need not be taken too seriously. It is of that order of interpretation which would say that English neo-realism is a reflection of the aristocratic snobbery of the English; [that] the tendency of French thought to dualism [is] an expression of an alleged Gallic disposition to keep a mistress in addition to a wife; and that the idealism of Germany [is] a manifestation of an ability to elevate beer and sausage into a higher synthesis with the spiritual values of Beethoven and Wagner.”²²

Dewey’s devotion to practice, to the testing of ideas, led him to be involved in every social and political and philosophical cause and controversy of his time. He believed that philosophy is not a “device for dealing with the problems of philosophers” but rather should be “a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men,”²³ and he was always willing to act on this conviction. He said, “Better it is for philosophy to err in active participation in the living struggles and issues of its own ages and times than to maintain an immune monastic impeccability, without relevancy and bearing in the generating ideas of its contemporary present.”²⁴ His devotion to this approach led Dewey to chair—at the age of seventy-seven—the grueling hearings on the case of Leon Trotsky, held in Coyoacán, México, in the home of Diego Rivera. During this period Rivera made a charcoal sketch of him.

Dewey’s brand of pragmatism might be called “passionate” pragmatism, because he believed that “Intelligence . . . is inherently involved in action. Moreover, there is no opposition between it and emotion. There is such a thing as passionate intelligence, an ardor in behalf of light shining into the murky places of social existence, and as zeal for its refreshing and purifying effect.”²⁵ So it was that two years before Dewey died, Henry Steele Commager said of him: “So faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed, that he

became the guide, the mentor, and the conscience of the American people: it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken."²⁶

When Dewey was offered the post at Columbia University, he insisted that he be given a dual appointment in the Department of Philosophy at Teachers College, because he wanted to pursue the ground-breaking innovations he had started at the famous Laboratory School at Chicago.

With respect to his lifelong interest in education, Dewey wrote in 1930, "I can recall but one critic who has suggested that my thinking has been too much permeated by interest in education. Although a book called *Democracy and Education* was for many years that in which my philosophy, such as it is, was most fully expounded, I do not know that philosophic critics, as distinct from teachers, have ever had recourse to it. I have wondered whether such facts signified that philosophers, in general, although they are themselves usually teachers, have not taken education with sufficient seriousness for it to occur to them that any rational person could actually think it possible that philosophizing should focus about education as the supreme human interest in which, moreover, other problems, cosmological, moral, logical, come to a head."²⁷

There is no question that John Dewey almost single-handedly changed the nature of education in this country, particularly at the elementary school level. But the excesses committed in the name of "progressive education" simply did not come from Dewey but from some of his disciples. Sidney Hook says that Dewey "was sympathetic to the many progressive educators who invoked his name for the things they were doing, particularly because of the ferocity of the attack on them by reactionaries. But he never intellectually approved of the enthusiasts and faddists, 'the Deweyites of progressive education,' precisely because, as he once put it, they weren't experimental enough, that is, they didn't learn from the outcome of their own experiments but clung to some of the fetishistic catchwords and practices that once were presented hypothetically. He always kept saying that progressive education was the most difficult kind of education to introduce properly."²⁸ Although the expression "learning by doing" did not originate with Dewey, teaching the child and teaching the whole child, rather than the subject, did. It is hard now to realize that Dewey introduced workbenches rather than orderly rows of desks, and that before the Chicago Laboratory School, schools had no domestic science—home economics—plays, dramatics, dancing, games, or nature study, and that machines, tools, banks, stores, gardens, and what not supplanted the old text books.

Here are some of Dewey's memorable remarks on education: "If I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education I should say: 'Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life.' And to add that only in this case does it become truly a preparation for after life is not the paradox it seems. An activity which does not have worth enough to be carried on for its own sake cannot be very effective as a preparation for something else. . . . [The new spirit in education] forms the habit of requiring that every act be an outlet of the whole self, and it provides the instruments of such complete functioning."²⁹

"When customs are flexible and youth is educated as youth and not as premature adulthood, no nation grows old."³⁰

"Knowledge is humanistic in quality not because it is *about* human products in the past, but because of what it *does* in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy. Any subject matter which accomplishes this result is humane, and any subject matter which does not accomplish it is not even educational."³¹

"Unless culture be a superficial polish, a veneering of mahogany over common wood, it surely is this—the growth of the imagination in flexibility, in scope, and in sympathy, till the life which the individual lives is informed with the life of nature and of society."³²

Dewey was a feminist and advanced in his thinking about women's rights. In New York, he was active in the suffrage movement; it is said that on the occasion of a major parade on Fifth Avenue in New York City, Dewey was late to join the marchers, who thrust a sign into his hands, which he carried jauntily, only to become perplexed that bystanders tittered when he went by. When he finally looked at his sign, he saw that it read "Men can vote; why can't I?" At about this same time, Dewey responded to a 1911 survey about women's suffrage. One question asked in the survey was whether a woman's so-called "moral standing" should affect her right to vote. Dewey responded: "There is enough of a double standard of morality now. When a man's 'moral standing' affects the right to vote, it should also affect a woman's—not till then."³³

Such simplicity and directness are the traits I admire most in John Dewey; he had a down-to-earth quality that shines through even in the most abstract discussion. Sidney Hook said that Dewey took no special pride in matters of "dress, literary style, social origins, or intellectual achievement. He was prepared to learn from anyone."³⁴

Dewey's unpretentiousness is perfectly illustrated in a widely circulated story of an event that occurred during the years the Dewey family had a farm on Long Island. I will quote Max Eastman's version: Dewey

“learned all about farming, and actually earned money enough during one year to ‘pay for his keep.’ . . . He was pleased when one day a hurry call came from a wealthy neighbor for a dozen eggs, and, the children being in school, he himself took the eggs over in a basket. Going by force of habit to the front door, he was told brusquely that deliveries were made at the rear. He trotted obediently around to the back door, feeling both amused and happy. Some time later he was giving a talk to the women’s club of the neighborhood, and his wealthy customer, when he got up to speak, exclaimed in a loud whisper, ‘Why, that looks exactly like our eggman.’ ”³⁵ Because there are several similar versions of this story, I had always thought it at least in part apocryphal up to a month ago when a curious thing happened: I had a letter from a man in Georgia named Homer Cooper, asking whether the Deweys ever had a farm, because he was sure he remembered that when he was a child he went with John Dewey one day to deliver eggs to a fancy place where a doorman told him tradespeople should go to the service entrance.

In the twilight of his life—at the age of eighty-seven—Dewey remarried, and at the urging of his second wife, adopted two young children. He mentioned this sequence of events in a postcard to a friend, saying “You’ve probably seen the reports of my marriage, which I think is going pretty well. We’ve been married six weeks now and we already have two children.”

To review and partially summarize the life and career of John Dewey, I will cite Commager, who described him this way in 1950: “Pioneer in educational reform, organizer of political parties, counselor to statesmen, champion of labor, of woman’s rights, of peace, of civil liberties, interpreter of America abroad and of Russia, Japan, China, and Germany to the American people, he was the spearhead of a dozen movements, the leader of a score of crusades, the advocate of a hundred reforms. He illustrated in his own career how effective philosophy could be in [the] reconstruction of society.”³⁶ But that was the public John Dewey—the quiet, albeit relentless, fighter for the good, the right, and the American way. He is also appreciated by many as a gentle, humorous, modest man who made a difference in all our lives. This is the reason that after thirty years of close association, Dewey’s thought, his personality, his wisdom, continue to challenge and to charm me.

NOTES

1. Morris Raphael Cohen, “On American Philosophy: III,” *New Republic*, 17 March 1920, p. 1.
2. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 5.
3. “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” *Contemporary*

American Philosophy, eds. George P. Adams and Wm. Pepperell Montague (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930), 16.

4. Dewey to W. T. Harris, 17 May 1881, Hoose Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

5. Dewey told Sidney Hook that Harris had written him “that my first effort in philosophy was a gem of the purest water. That had a great influence in my decision to go into philosophy.” “Some Memories of John Dewey,” *Commentary* 14 (September 1952): 245–53, 247.

6. “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 16.

7. George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 25.

8. “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 15.

9. Herbert Schneider, “John Dewey: A Biographical Memoir,” *Yearbook of the American Philosophical Society* (Philadelphia: The Society, 1952), 311–15, 311.

10. As the book was printed late in 1886, Harper and Bros. put the next year’s date, 1887, on the title page of *Psychology. Early Works of John Dewey*, vol. 2. Subsequent references to *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, are to the three series *Early Works* [EW], *Middle Works* [MW], and *Later Works* [LW].

11. “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 28.

12. James to Schiller, 15 November 1903, in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1935), 2:501.

13. Jane Dewey, “Biography of John Dewey,” in Paul A. Schilpp, ed. *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1939), 30.

14. *Ibid.*, 29.

15. John Dewey, “In Response,” in *John Dewey: The Man and His Philosophy, Addresses Delivered in New York in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 179.

16. “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 22.

17. “The Future of Liberalism,” 1935, *LW* 11:292–93.

18. *A Common Faith*, 1934, *LW* 9:23.

19. *Logic*, 1938, *LW* 12:527.

20. *Human Nature and Conduct*, 1922, *MW* 14:164.

21. “An Added Note as to the Practical,” 1916, *MW* 10:366.

22. “Pragmatic America,” 1922, *MW* 13:307.

23. “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” 1917, *MW* 10:46; as early as 1897, Dewey wrote that, “As the philosopher has received his problem from the world of action, so he must return his account there for auditing and liquidation.” “The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge,” 1897, *EW* 5:6.

24. “Does Reality Possess Practical Character?” 1908, *MW* 4:142.

25. *A Common Faith*, 1934, *LW* 9:52.

26. *The American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 100.

27. “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 1930, *LW* 5:156.

28. Hook, “Some Memories of John Dewey,” 252.

29. “Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal,” 1893, *EW* 4:50.

30. *Human Nature and Conduct*, 1922, *MW* 14:73.

31. *Democracy and Education*, 1916, *MW* 9:238.

32. *The School and Society*, 1915, *MW* 1:38.

33. “A Symposium on Women’s Suffrage,” *International* 3 (1911): 94.

34. Hook, “Some Memories of John Dewey,” 251.

35. “Portrait of John Dewey,” *Atlantic*, December 1941, p. 681.

36. Commager, *The American Mind*, 100.