

# *Theology and Liberal Education in Dewey*

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WE WILL FIRST MENTION decisive influences on John Dewey and then give a resume of his philosophy of education. It is only within such a frame that his teaching on theology and liberal education fits.

Dewey was a long time developing, say from his childhood in the 'sixties to roughly 1900. He went through an "evangelical" development as a child, and in college a Hegelian development which was foreign to him though a type of thinking then semi-domesticated in America. At length, he began meeting a different world and according to his own report he went through a development far less uniform, a piecemeal and pluralist development. This itself, which he thought gave us the final Dewey, was qualified by those earlier and therefore in a way deeper claims. There are a lot of John Deweys and to represent him in a straight line is too simple. "Dewey in Search of Himself" and "Dewey the Liberal Theologian" make sense and it is indecisive to say that such captions would have displeased him.

During part of the time envisaged here (1897 to 1934), Dewey was still in transition: as he finally said, "from absolutism to experimentalism." His perpetual demand for firsthand experience was largely a flight

from his earlier Hegelian a priori self. He was looking for himself and he thought he found himself in his second conscious search. In his restlessness, his zeal for reform, reconstruction and meliorism, he was driven by a feeling of discontent and pilgrimage. The constant restlessness came from the American pioneer spirit, which remained strong in him; and from the idea of progress dominating his age. But it came in part from a blocked Christian sense of time and the meaning of the world. Dewey was more concerned with action than in understanding man, science or freedom. He was considered a rationalist, but a better one word for him, as he said, was meliorist. His goal was what he called scientific humanism and it was also educational and social reform, but it is possible to see which was subordinated to which; his fight against books, tradition and dictation he thought a fight for freedom; understanding or reason played second fiddle to adjustment and social good.

We look first at "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897), his most notable early work on education.<sup>1</sup> True education (he said) comes through stimulating the student's powers by the demands of social situations. Through these demands, the student comes

out of a narrow feeling and action, comes to act as a member of a unity and can see himself from the standpoint of the group's welfare. Unless teachers' efforts are tied to activity independently initiated by students, education is pressure from without; properly it is linked with self-initiated activity; otherwise it balks nature. The starting point is the student's powers, interests and habits, and the terminus is the translation of these into their equivalents in social service. The school (he said) is primarily a social institution helping to share inherited resources and to use his powers for social ends. It should represent life as real to youth as the home and the playground. It should grow out of home life and proceed with activities the child knows at home. "It is the business of the school to deepen and extend this sense of the values bound up in his home life." Much education fails, said Dewey, because it does not see school as a form of community life; in proper relation with others in a unity of work and thought, one gets the best and deepest moral training. Too much stimulus and control come from the teacher. "The teacher's business is to determine, on the basis of a larger experience and riper wisdom, how the discipline of life" shall reach the student.

The center of correlation (Dewey continued) is not science, literature or history, but the student's social life and social activities. Influenced by a picturesque evolutionary view, Dewey said that the child should go through the basic types of activity which made civilization what it is, cooking, sewing, manual work. History has educative value if it presents such phases of life and growth. Science has educative value if it furnishes tools for effective regulation of experience. Progress is not in a succession of studies, but in developing new attitudes toward experience and new interest in it. "Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience." Dewey said the way to present and treat materials is within the child's nature where active precedes passive, and expression precedes conscious impression. Otherwise the

student becomes a blotter with a passive and absorbing attitude.

Dewey said the school is the most effective instrument for social reform and progress, teaching is the art of shaping human powers and, when done for social service, is the supreme art. He concluded in these words:

—the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life.

—every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling, that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth.

—in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God.

In sum, Dewey said three things. First, education is student-centered. Proper education is tied to the student's firsthand experience, his interests and self-initiated activity; the student is chronologically and psychologically the primary agent. Second, the school is to represent life, the home life and play life of the student, to imitate these and extend them. Third, the action is social as are play and home life and the basic types of activity in the race, and the student's social action, a carry-over of the paradigm of the home, the playground and the human race, is for the sake of "the formation of proper social life." The chief assumptions were two: first, education consists exclusively of action—it is a doing, a manipulating; and second, "the proper social life," "proper social order," "the right social life" is known by someone or group. These assumptions, uncritically made in 1897, raise problems. The first, that learning is by action only, raises questions about the nature of learning. The second—who says what is a good social life and who says what shall be taught—is an abiding question. Things taken to be evil were the following: that teachers should afford stimulus or control, that the student should have a receptive attitude, that initiation should

come from without—from books, tradition or the teacher.

To Dewey's credit in that essay are his respect for the student's freedom and inviolateness, and his insistence that education is by and for the community. Up to 1897 and much later the student as the "principal agent and dynamic factor" in learning had been little regarded.<sup>2</sup> Dewey was stating laws basic for education: Respect the initial freedom in the student as a person, encourage his power to grow in intelligence and love; education in and by and for community is all the more significant when we notice that Dewey himself, a born independent, was strongly individualistic, a strain in him, which, crossed by love of community and humanity, was hard to reconcile with this latter love.

These goods and bads followed Dewey's educational theory the rest of his days. He was forward-looking, a man to act, to go right on, and all his long life, with the notable exception of dropping Hegel, he was unlikely to change direction. He was a man with his mind made up, and in this aspect, namely that things, method included, had to be all one way, namely *his* way, there is a touch of the absolutism which Dewey thought he had left behind.

In "Democracy in Education" (1903),<sup>3</sup> Dewey said that in "this magnificent institution," the public school, neither teacher nor learner was free. The teacher lacked power of initiation and constructive endeavor, with no effective way to register judgment on education; the system was undemocratic, the teacher suffering dictation as to matter and method. The learner also, Dewey claimed, suffered suppression of his individuality. He wanted the learner to be like a scientific inquirer: (a) with first-hand experience instead of hand-me-down formulas, and (b) in exercising freedom of activity like that whereby science faces problems, collects data, uses observation and imagination, instead of passively going with presented material.

Dewey's *How We Think* (1910) is put in terms of a man who has to find his way,

and the figure of the forked road perfectly says how Dewey saw learning from problems and felt need. A man is uncertain which road to take: he uses the knowledge he has, seeks new knowledge and tries one way or another to find out. For the student, it is a question of felt need, live personal interest, inquiry, hypothesis and action. The teacher's part is to accept interests as signs of growing power. If the car breaks down or the house is on fire, the knowledge-point is tied to the particular interest of the man and the moment. The same holds for the student.<sup>4</sup>

*Schools for Tomorrow* by Dewey and his daughter Evelyn appeared in 1915, and captions for accompanying photos—"Printing Teaches English," "The Pupils Build the School-houses," "To Learn to Think, we must Exercise our Limbs"—show commitment to "learning by doing." Schools were to connect child and environment as completely as possible; the student is "presented with a problem" which he is curious to solve; the task assigned by evolution and the struggle for existence is to prepare him for life, and the essential idea is adjustment: good adjustment means "a successful human being." Young children—it was said—learn through the use of their bodies and through instincts, and physical activities are "as instruments for training powers of judgment and right thinking. That is to say that children are learning by doing." Eventually the child will reach out toward theoretic aspects of things. The laboring man also should have a "foundation of general education on which to build his technical skill," and training children to docility and obedience is suited to autocratic society.

Dewey's *Democracy and Education* appeared in 1916, and the following matters from it are in line with what he had been saying for twenty years. First: Learning must begin in the immediate life-situation and go from known to unknown. The learner's mind must be active and self-active; children must do something in order to learn, manipulate things, make and un-

make. Progress in science was said to show that there is no real knowing and fruitful understanding except as the offspring of doing. Second: As soon as begotten, the living thing has a claim to life, a self-renewing and interactive process; if learning occurs, it is at the resultant end. The individual living thing needs initiation into the ways of the group, and education fills the gap. Third: Communication or any social arrangement vitally shared is educative; living together educates by enriching imagination and demanding accurate and vivid thought. Education is transmission through communication, and schools are a relatively artificial means of transmission. Shared and communicated experience is democracy, and the dual test of democracy in education is this: How numerous and varied are the interests consciously shared and how full and free is the interplay of interests with various forms of association? Fourth: What is the end and goal? It is within the process, and is the process. Education is growth. Life is development, and developing-growing is life. "Translated into its educational equivalent, this means (i) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and that (ii) the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming."

"No end beyond itself" might suggest that Dewey meant that learning can be an end, whatever the utility goods flowing from it. That is not what Dewey meant. He said that "culture" and "utility" tend to coincide: as the social uses of subjects such as geometry and arithmetic have increased and enlarged, their liberalizing value and their practical value "approach the same limit." But Dewey's assertion does not meet the facts. On rereadings of *Democracy and Education*, we must say that to squeeze something other than utility values and social-use values out of Dewey's theory would be unfair. His view in *How We Think*, in *Schools for Tomorrow* and *Democracy and Education* was that learning comes out of a practical situation and is utilitarian from

start to finish. A particular form of evolutionary theory—and the general theory and this form of it left a mark on Dewey—held that some animals were caught in a tight place out of which they could not get without acquiring such and such favorable variation, they acquired it, got out and survived. One set of animals needed mind to get out of an otherwise impossible fix, they acquired it, got out, and man thereby exists. Thus mind is instrumental, an *ad hoc* variation acquired in the struggle for existence. Mind is a problem-solving tool of a particular mammal at a particular time in evolutionary history. This theory of how we learn and of what learning is for will have a body of assumptions from which to deduce itself. "How we learn" will be geared to the metaphor of the forked road. Learning will come out of a practical situation, be an active doing and manipulating and be for practical goals within the process.

Within such doctrines, sheer joy in learning, in seeing and hearing, in contemplating, in uncommitted understanding and appreciation has little room. In Dewey's most famous work on education, liberal learning as defended by Newman and a joy in learning as recommended by Whitehead were out of place. They did not make basic practical sense to him. A few lines spotlight speculative scientific learning as necessary to scientific progress. Otherwise, the "pure," theoretic, disinterested and contemplative side of learning, a life of joy in sensing and understanding failed to get Dewey's imprimatur.

Throughout his works, there are many pages on the practical origins of learning, the doing-manipulative character of learning, the practical ends of learning and only a few lines, and these not strongly felt and truly Deweyan lines, on the uncommitted, simply free and in that sense "liberal" character of human learning. Merely to look on a world of sunshine or blizzard as being and as good and beautiful would have little defense in Dewey's school. Learning was regarded as a struggle, much like building a log house in a

forest. In order to learn, the student would have to manipulate, shovel snow, or measure distances between planets, so as to help society. In this theory, learning is no luxury and no simple gift of nature; a view dictated by a cross between "nature" as an evolutionary struggle and "nature" as step-motherly and evil (though Dewey explicitly repudiated the latter notion). If learning is taken in this practical sense, as Dewey insisted, and if liberal learning is seen as the literally free and uncommitted—"an end in itself"—it is incorrect to say that Dewey's theory has room for liberal learning. Dewey would not say so, and it is fair to repeat what he often repeated: that learning comes out of the practical and is for the practical. The pragmatic-pioneering spirit dictated to him an ultra practical view of learning and its purposes. From the first we have been doers, the contemplative and stand-by attitude outside our experience. That is one reason why Dewey tended to say that the "doing" answer is the fundamental philosophic answer to learning, to education and society. Worked into a theory of learning, the activist view contains obvious truth; people learn much by doing, by trial and error, making and unmaking; the learner is the principal agent and little children, though given to playing for fun, to seeing and listening and learning for fun, need to be active and "doing" in much of their learning, a point which the Montessori method adopts.

Questions remain. One is whether teachers have yet sufficiently learnt that the student is the principal agent in learning and that the learner's mind has to come to be self-active. Like the post-medieval students who had to "argue their way" to a degree, students have to listen their way to a college education. But it is a question whether "doing" is the only way to learn. If liberal learning is uncommitted, it is obvious that "doing something" for adjustment or social change cannot be a liberal way of learning.

In Dewey's theory, was learning really for "adjustment," mere initiation into the ways of savage or civilized society? We

doubt it, though Dewey elaborately said so. What Dewey wanted was not learning, initiation or adjustment, but change and social reform; learning was for social amelioration, in which (he said) education was the first lever. It remains difficult, however, to say on what fundamental pattern Dewey wanted reform, a pattern set by nature or one set by man, since these two were at odds in Dewey's doctrine. In the later Dewey after 1908, it would be truer to say that "nature" was in tow to man rather than man in tow to "nature," and he finally said that we feel control passing into our hands. Learning was committed beyond itself, and learning for the sake of learning was uninteresting to Dewey.

Dewey sought economic freedom, political freedom and the freedom offered by literacy. He fought shy of ends in a literal sense, thinking they would stop evolution and progress; he approved "no fixed self-enclosed finalities." His words are often quoted: "Ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences. 'Endless ends' is a way of saying that there are no ends—that is no fixed self-enclosed finalities."<sup>5</sup> But he did not go consistently with this doctrine, he declared for socio-temporal ends. He wanted man economically, politically and religiously free and said so in words which repudiate his dogmatic "ends are endless" and "there are no ends." Government, business, art and religion, he said, have a meaning: "to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals" without respect to castes; "this is all one with saying that the test of their value is the extent to which they educate every individual into the full stature of his possibility."<sup>6</sup>

He saw what he saw—the possibility and need of social emancipation through schools. He saw much less well the possibility of emancipated judgment. Recall how dead set and absolute he was against the fixed and ultimate, and it becomes easy to see how fantastic it seemed to him that education should not be subordinated to further ends. The liberation he desired

through education was social betterment. Hence his description of himself as a meliorist. He said it is a mistake to regard liberal and practical as distinct, an assertion based on wishful thinking. Take a deliberate Deweyism that the two need not be distinct. In his Inglis Lecture he said: ". . . study within one's vocational preparation is an important means of freeing and liberalizing the mind."<sup>7</sup> We wish this were so, for instance in journalism, physics, engineering and commercial studies. Dewey was wish-thinking it was so. Take the following statements by him in that 1931 Lecture. When schools "open to students the scientific and social potentialities of important occupations in society, they will become more genuinely practical as well as more liberal," and if students have "proper" projects, "the separation between the practical and the liberal does not even arise." A good social condition is better in Dewey's world than truth or beauty or a contemplated good of any magnitude, and for him a good condition is radically and finally the good.

Where does God belong in Dewey's world of education and society? God does not belong in it. God is irrelevant. These assertions are strong, especially in view of the facts that in 1897 Dewey said that the genuine teacher was the prophet of the true God, and that *A Common Faith* (1934) was concerned to state a positive theory of religion. Let us try to solve this riddle. In his youthful philosophic days Dewey had tried to assimilate a heavy diet of Hegel and it was only by the mid-eighties that the native Dewey began to assert itself and to shed his troublesome Hegelian self. Something of Hegel remained, an all-this or all-that mentality, and as late as 1890 Dewey was still literally Hegelian enough to write that nature (which in time would be quite other to Dewey) is only a factor in "the self-determination of spirit," and that "the categories of physical science can be reconciled with the principles of the moral and religious life by being taken up into them." All who know the Dewey of 1900 and up

to his death in 1952 know that principles were taboo—he made fun of beginnings, ends, essences and ultimates—and all know that a reconciliation of science with morals and religion would on Dewey's view have to be turned the other way. Between '85 and '90 Dewey was being reborn. The Hegelian idealist was becoming empirical, instrumentalist and experimentalist.

Dewey thought such a break entailed a break with theism. Noting that modern philosophy was set in motion by Descartes, he said that a summary of "Descartes through Darwin" would read: Ultimates are out of the picture: questions about ultimates are bypassed: that is how we now answer them.<sup>8</sup> His early congregational training impressed him as painfully negative and he never got over his youthful conviction that to be a Christian is to see nature as evil; in his words, "total corruption of the body and lusts of carnal flesh." He reacted against such anti-natural positions. In 1930 he said what he had long implied, that life has no purpose though man has many purposes: man has completely broken from his parent, purposeless nature.<sup>9</sup> In 1933 Dewey said in the *Christian Century* that he did not deny the possible existence "of a personal will which is causative and directive of the universe," but thought that we were too busy to adduce the evidence. He proceeded on the secular-city assumption that to believe in the transcendent (which he called supernatural and "supernal") would deflect energy from urgent tasks.

In *A Common Faith* (1934), as mature as anything he ever said on religion, he declared for religion on his own terms. He said that "any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal and against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its enduring value, is religious in quality." This was said with conviction, though the doctrine is strange; it says that totalitarian activities are "religious." What he wanted to do was what he had always wanted, to defend and advance man and his values. Advisedly or not, he thought that the religions did a bad job of

that defense and advance, and he said that the identification of our values with the creeds and cults of religion "must be dissolved." This was his *Carthago delenda est* position. Unsympathetic to actual and historical religions, Dewey was unable to see deeply into the religious problem of mankind.

On the religious question, Dewey was negative or at most neutral. He generally stood off, silent. We suggest reasons. First, under the influence of his first wife, he thought that to leave his early religious training meant that he had to leave God. Second, he thought that to abandon Hegel's pantheon meant that he had to leave God. Third, he thought that science and philosophy from Descartes through Darwin had "undercut" the bases on which people claimed to have knowledge of God's existence and nature. Fourth, he tended to think that the method of science is our only sure way of knowing and that this, together with progress in science and the hope of progress in society, leaves the God question irrelevant.

The enumerated positions, well marked in Dewey, naturally left him unsympathetic to "God in education" and "religion in the schools." Theology in education could scarcely occur to him. The ideal and hope expressed in *A Common Faith* was a cooperative affirming and bettering of humanity. He had his own usage for the word "God" to which he said he was not committed and for the word "religious" to

which he was committed. He had called his philosophy pragmatism, instrumentalism and experimentalism. For those lectures, secularism was a correct designation, and though they sought a universalism or totalism, we believe that "sectarian secularism" (to use words from Will Herberg) would describe his position. Dewey's philosophy, said Morris R. Cohen, was "dominated throughout by what I must regard as an unwise fear of otherworldliness."<sup>10</sup>

On the main points of this article, we sum up the precipitate left by Dewey. In freeing the student in his studies and liberating man socially through education and through every sort of technique and social institution, Dewey remains an interesting and commanding philosopher. On liberal education as an end justified in itself, an immanent good emancipating the possessor's judgment, Dewey is silent and lacks sympathy and sensitivity. On theology in education, it is much to expect Dewey to fit into a classical Occidental or Oriental picture, and he would have said that he did not want to fit into either. For all his liberalism, he wanted students and critics to take him whole, as if his humanitarian secularism had closed and locked the gates. His vigorous "Challenge to Liberal Thought," written in his mid-eighties, expressed surprise that new philosophies of education had arisen, with a traditional and theological bent. In effect his parting shot was, "No more of that!"<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup>John Dewey, *Education Today*, edited by Joseph Ratner (New York: Putnam, 1940), 3-17.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (Yale University Press, 1943), 32: "The actual merit of modern conceptions of education since Pestalozzi, Rousseau, and Kant, has been the rediscovery of the fundamental truth that the principal agent and dynamic factor is not the art of the teacher but the inner principle of activity, the inner dynamism of nature and of the mind."

<sup>3</sup>*Education Today*, *op. cit.*, 62-73. <sup>4</sup>Cf. John Dewey, *How We Think*. Revised edition (New York: Holt, 1933), 13-15. (First edition, 1910). <sup>5</sup>John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Holt, 1922), 232. <sup>6</sup>John Dewey, *Reconstruction in*

*Philosophy* (New York: Holt, 1920), 186. <sup>7</sup>Harvard University Press, 1931. <sup>8</sup>Dewey's work, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (New York: Holt, 1910). The title essay appeared in 1909. <sup>9</sup>John Dewey, "What I believe," *The Forum*, March, 1930. <sup>10</sup>*New Republic*, 8 (1916), 118-119. Dewey signed "Humanist Manifesto" which appeared in 1933; the most obvious carry-over from that document to its successor in 1973 was a declaration against transcendent theism as deflecting and misusing human energy. "Humanist Manifesto II" in effect takes Dewey's *A Common Faith* as its bible. <sup>11</sup>"Challenge to Liberal Thought," *Fortune*, 30 and 31 (1944, 1945).