

John Dewey, An Appreciation

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Robert Walter Clopton¹ (1906–1981) was professor of education in the College of Education at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa from 1943 to 1967 and co-editor with Tsuin Chen Ou of Dewey's Lectures in China.² A thermofax copy of his previously unpublished address was sent to Roberta Dewey in a letter on May 24, 1962 (Potter & Williams, 2000).³

It is not surprising that in the year that you chose a professor of education as your president you should find that the subject of the annual Presidential address is John Dewey. Dewey is identified in the public mind chiefly as an educational philosopher—and, I might add at the very beginning, I have seen him shocked, distressed, and even (sweet-tempered as he normally was) angry at some of the sorts of educational philosophy popularly attributed to him.

But it is not so much about Dewey as a philosopher of education that I speak tonight, as about an indefatigable student of life whose interests ranged, like those of Aristotle, over the spectrum of human experience and whose curiosity and incisive intelligence led him into analyses of an almost incredible variety of human problems.

His fellow philosophers have recorded their appreciation of an indebtedness to John Dewey's penetrating insights and original observations in fields as widely separated (in the popular mind) as psychology, ethics, aesthetics, logic, epistemology, sociology, theory of science, politics, and jurisprudence (Dewey is quoted less frequently perhaps, but more accurately by Justices of the Supreme Court than by certain schools of educationists).

Dewey was born in 1859—the year in which Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was published, and two years before the outbreak of the War Between the States. When he reached the age of seventy in 1929, his admirers planned a great birthday celebration, at which leading philosophers of the day expressed their appreciation of his contributions. In the following decade Dewey continued his explorations into and assessment of human experience, and produced some of his most significant works—at an age normally thought of as a time for “retirement.” Again on his eightieth birthday there was a celebration, with tributes in the form of learned papers

by his colleagues and admirers. But even at eighty Dewey could not “retire” from the market place of ideas, and continued to write and publish, so that when he reached ninety, there was no need for the celebrants to go back and plow the same ground they had plowed in 1929 and 1939. Few men indeed have so enriched their culture in the ninth decade of life as Dewey did. He was still pounding out material of importance on his trusty old Remington a few days before his death in 1952, four months short of his ninety-third birthday.

When Dewey first came to Hawai'i in 1899 to teach in one of the earliest summer schools held for public school teachers, I was not, unfortunately, around to meet him, enjoy his dry humor, and profit from his wisdom. At this time he was still a young man, not quite forty years old, but already an established and nationally respected figure, both in philosophy and in education, although obviously he had not achieved the preeminence that was to become his in the Fifty-three years of life which then remained ahead of him.

Dewey's lectures to Hawai'i's teachers in the summer of 1899, set in motion a “grass-roots” surge of educational reform; and if there had been even a modicum of forward-looking leadership, Hawai'i might well have become a demonstration center for the nation in elementary school theory and practice. But that's another story.

The next time Dewey came to Hawai'i (for any more than a day's stopover while his ship was in port) was some Fifty-two years later, in 1951, when he and his family spent several months at the Halekulani—and came within an ace of buying a home on the slopes of Diamond Head. Some four years or so earlier, at a youthful eighty-seven, Dewey, for many years a widower, had taken unto himself a bride; and the couple had adopted two Belgian war-orphans, who were still of elementary school age during their Hawaiian visit.

(Shortly after he arrived, as we walked across the Halekulani grounds, he remarked to me, “They tell me that the Halekulani is for two classes of people: the newly-wed and the nearly-dead. Seems to me they should give me a discount, since I belong in both categories.”)

Having been greatly influenced by Dewey’s writings, especially those in education, and knowing that he was one of the truly great figures of this century, I was naturally excited at the news that he was to be in Hawai‘i for an extended stay. I thought of meeting the ship on which the Deweys were arriving, but concluded that there would be so many other and much more important people on hand that I’d be in the way, so I didn’t go. I did, hoping that it wouldn’t be regarded as presumption on the part of an unknown faculty member in a small university, write Mrs. Dewey a note, expressing the hope that I might be privileged to meet Professor Dewey at a time when it would be least inconvenient for him. The very next day my phone rang, a pleasant voice announced, “This is Robbie Dewey. I have your nice note here. Could you drop by this afternoon for a drink?” It was as simple as that.

All the misgivings I’d had about being presumptuous, about forcing my way in on the attentions of a man who had long since been a figure of world importance, were dissipated within the first few minutes; and by the time we had talked about topics of common interest for two hours (which seemed no more than ten minutes), I felt as though I had known John Dewey for half a lifetime. After that I saw him frequently—at his hotel, in my home, or when we went out together for meals at one or another restaurant in town. Very soon a feeling of warm friendship developed. I cannot truthfully say that it replaced my feelings of awe and admiration; but it grew up alongside that awe and admiration. Very few experiences in my life have meant quite so much to me as the knowledge that this great philosopher had accepted me as his friend.

An anecdote will throw some light on the simple sincerity of this great man. My daughter, who at the time was a student in University High School, bought a book as a birthday gift for Adrienne, the older of the two Dewey children, and after an early supper at home, she and I drove down to the Halekulani to deliver it. Mrs. Dewey had just put the children to bed, and she and Mr. Dewey were on their way to dinner. Looking for a change in menu, they asked us to recommend a restaurant. When we found that

they hadn’t yet been to the Willows, we asked them to get in the Hillman and go along with us (not mentioning that we’d already had our meal). Over the dinner table conversation was vigorous—as it always was with Dewey—and before we realized how much time had passed the waitress was jittering around in the background, giving me the signal that she wished we’d get out so that they could close.

After we dropped the Deweys at the hotel, near midnight, and as Bets and I drove toward Diamond Head, she came up with the remark, “Gee, Pap, I used to think that you were sort of smart.”

“Well, thank you,” I came back; “just what was it that disillusioned you?”

“Aw, Pap, that wasn’t what I meant. I don’t really think you’re dumb; it’s just that I never heard anybody talk who could make things—important things—sound so clear as Mr. Dewey made them sound. Once I got used to the way his dental plates clicked together, and when I’d listened long enough so that I wasn’t bothered by the way he mumbled his words, so that I could concentrate on what he was saying, it was beautiful! Mr. Dewey may be sort of old, but his mind clicks, and you can understand what he’s talking about—things that have always, up to now, been so vague and hard to get hold of. You could just see the ideas coming to life and growing as he talked! I’ll never forget this evening as long as I live!”

My daughter’s response to John Dewey’s unique charm made me think of a comment by Irwin Edman, eminent American philosopher, who was first a student and then a colleague of Dewey at Columbia University. I have been unable to locate the article in which I ran across Edman’s account, but I recall it vividly enough to be able to paraphrase it accurately enough for our purposes. Edman was writing of Dewey’s “classroom manner,” and of the fact that many students who had enrolled in his classes attracted by the magic of his fame were bitterly disappointed at his rambling and apparently incoherent delivery, and discouraged at the difficulty they encountered in following his train of thought. Certainly Dewey was no showman; he frequently didn’t enunciate distinctly; and it was often true that the materials of his lectures struck the uninitiated as being sadly disconnected. (Dewey would undoubtedly have received an “unsatisfactory” rating on the forms used at the University of Hawai‘i on which students record their judgements of their instructors!)

But Edman went on to say that in every class there were always two or three men, at the least—and he numbered himself among these—who were thrilled at the opportunity of being present as Dewey, ambling and weaving back and forth in the front of the lecture hall, tackled an idea, took it apart, worked with it, rearranged the parts of it, and came up with a concept that was excitingly novel. As nearly as I can recall, Edman described this experience as “the opportunity of being present as intelligence became visible and audible,”—an appraisal not so different from my daughter’s delighted exclamation that “You could just see the ideas coming to life and growing as he talked.”

When he wrote, Dewey’s passion for exact expression, his insistence upon introducing qualifying clauses which were intended to prevent misconstruction of the idea he was presenting—and then of qualifying these clauses with further qualifiers, and often these with still further qualifiers, gave much of his writing a heavy, turgid, Germanic quality. Once when confronted with the complaint that his philosophy was couched in a jargon unintelligible to many literate people Dewey replied, “Let some of these young men explain me: it will make a career for them.” It did. (Edman, 1955, p. 24).

I found some delightful comments by Dewey himself on the question of his style in an autobiographical chapter which he contributed to *Contemporary American Philosophy*, edited by George P. Adams and William Pepperell Montague. At this time Dewey was seventy years old; this chapter was later reprinted in *The Saturday Review* in the issue devoted to Dewey’s ninetieth birthday, in October, 1949. After discussing Hegel’s influence on both the style and content of his early writing, Dewey went on to recall that when, in his very early writing, his interests were more theoretical and his presentation schematic, “writing was comparatively easy; there were even compliments upon the clearness of my style.” But as he became more and more concerned with “the pressure of concrete experiences” he was forced to seek for “an intellectual technique that would be consistent and yet capable of flexible adaptation to the concrete diversity of experienced things.” He admits that he continued to experience difficulty in trying “to satisfy these two opposed requirements, the formal and the material.

“For that very reason I have been acutely aware, too much so, doubtless, of a tendency of other thinkers and

writers to achieve a spacious lucidity and simplicity by the mere process of ignoring considerations which a greater respect for concrete materials of experience would have forced upon them” (Dewey, 1949).

In point of actual fact, I (and, I suspect, quite a number of other students of Dewey) have become so accustomed to the “lumbering and bumbling” of his style that I don’t mind it at all; and, being as deeply committed in my faltering way as Dewey was to the proposition that philosophy must deal with—or at least show applicability to—man’s concrete experiences in and of his world, I find real enjoyment in the precision he reached by his insistence upon qualifying his statements to the point that an honest, thoughtful and careful reader can hardly misread his intent. I am the first to admit that Dewey isn’t easy to read; it is quite possible to fail to grasp the point he’s making; it is frequently necessary to re-read a paragraph or a passage several times, or to back up and re-read a previous paragraph in order to follow his train of thought; but I am convinced that only the careless reader, or the one who is captive to his own misconceptions, can misread Dewey—that is to say, read into his statements those things which he never intended to say. I must confess, however, that there seem to be a good many people around who are careless readers, or who are so bound within the web of their preconceptions that they do manage to misinterpret passages which to me seem exceedingly precise and unmistakable—either that, or (as I sometimes suspect), they “quote” or refer to what Dewey is alleged to have said, without having consulted the sources to which they claim to refer.

In this connection I am reminded of a situation which has recurred at least a dozen times. Usually when some educational controversy was raging, one or another of my friends on the university faculty would tackle me at the lunch table or a cocktail party with some such remark as “Clopton, in certain respects you give the appearance of being a reasonably intelligent man. I don’t see how a fellow like you can go along with this guy Dewey when he says that...” and then some prime idiocy that Dewey never said, usually that none of the many educators who are students of his writing ever said, but that some critic has said that Dewey said.

I learned a long time ago that refutation is a weak weapon, especially in such informal situations. Try to prove to a man that he’s wrong, and he ends up convinced that he was right all the time—and further, that you are a nitwit who can’t stand to have his foolishness shown up. So when

I'm challenged this way, I don't even try to argue that Dewey didn't make, and couldn't have made, the statement attributed to him. Instead, I reach for my pen and a piece of paper, and tell my friend, "I don't recall coming across anything like that in my reading of Dewey, but he wrote so prodigiously that I still haven't managed to read everything he wrote. I'd like to check back on the context of your quotation, and find the connection in which Dewey said that. If you'll give me the source, I'll go right on over to the library and check it out, and then report back to you."

You can imagine how many times even the title of a book has been forthcoming in response to this gambit! Not once.

There seems to be a widespread impression that John Dewey was a revolutionary philosopher—that he set out to (and many believe, succeeded) turn the world of philosophy upside down. It is true that revolutionary consequences resulted from his formulations, his insights, his unremitting insistence upon his conviction that the worth of an idea is measured in its consequences.

Most familiar is the effect he had on education—not in America alone, but in China, in Japan, in Russia, in Turkey directly; and throughout most of the rest of the world by extension. Edman notes that everything that is associated with the transformation of education from mere passive learning of the three R's to education as shared living, everything that is associated with the modern trend in education, the emphasis on education as social and as an experience of shared life . . . is directly or obliquely the consequence of Dewey's ideas. (Edman, 1955, pp. 23–24).

But Dewey did not invent—and never laid claim to having invented—the ideas which bid fair to revolutionize educational practice. Educators who had died before Dewey was born had worked their way laboriously toward partial insights which paralleled those which Dewey expounded. Pestalozzi, among others, had emphasized the social and experiential nature of education, and founded schools which demonstrated his beliefs—and which served as patterns for educational experimentation both in America and in Europe. Fröbel had valid insights which approach Dewey's ideas—but the heavy mysticism of his formulations militated against their having the widespread influence which Dewey's ideas were to have a century later.

Dewey's thinking had revolutionary consequences in other areas of life than education. While it is impossible to

make a mathematical assessment of the extent of Dewey's direct influence on the social and political (and economic) changes associated with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, it is a matter of common agreement that many of the revolutionary changes of this period reflect ideas which Dewey had long been expounding, especially during the twenties. In dozens of articles in some of the most influential journals of the period Dewey had developed his thesis that the traditional American "rugged individualism" was not only outmoded, but actually inapplicable in a modern technological society and had advanced an alternative definition. In 1930 a number of these articles were collected and published in a volume, *Individualism, Old and New*. The events of the following decade proved that Dewey was not only a penetrating analyst of the current scene, but a prophet of things to come. His effect on socio-politico-economic thinking was at least as profound and as far-reaching as his effect on educational practice.

Edman asserts that "to Dewey's inspiration may be credited the whole tendency of modern legal thinking to turn from abstract principles to the estimation of law in terms of the consequences of law on human lives." (1955, p. 23) Judges, including justices of the Supreme Court ranging from Benjamin Cardozo to Oliver Wendell Holmes have testified to Dewey's influence on legal and judicial thinking, and have credited him with a significant role in the unprecedented change in the judicial climate which has occurred in the last three or four decades.

Dewey had a dedicated interest in the American labor movement (he was not only a powerful polemicist and astute theoretician in the cause of labor, but an active participant, being a member, and at times an officer in the American Federation of Teachers). Eminent labor leaders, Walter Reuther among others, have attested to Dewey's rich contribution in the development of organized labor.

In the realm of philosophy itself—"technical philosophy"—the impact of Dewey's contribution has been revolutionary. Generally acclaimed as "the philosopher's philosopher," Dewey is credited with the formulation and validation of a new method of philosophical inquiry. His little volume, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, a slight revision of a course of lectures delivered at the Imperial University of Tokyo in 1919, is recognized not only as a milestone, but as a turning point, a signal for a new direction, in the history of philosophical thought.

But revolutionary as have been the consequences of Dewey's thought, he did not originate—and I repeat—did not claim to have originated—anything wholly novel. In a peculiar sense, Dewey was the instrument of the coming of age, the reaching of fruition, of a tradition that might be said to be indigenous in American life. Through his skill at exposition and his sheer intellectual power, he brought to the level of philosophical respectability and the professional acceptance of his fellow philosophers the practice of applying a strictly empirical method to the problems of life and of judging the worth of ideas by their consequences in human experience. This practice is as old as the ancient Greeks—and undoubtedly even centuries older. Every generation has contained non-conformist thinkers who, refusing to be bound by the intellectual fashions of their times, have insisted on applying a rule-of-thumb logic to the problems they encountered, and on making their judgments with reference to observed or anticipated consequences in human experience. Early in the history of America there was evidence that Americans were destined ultimately to build a theoretical structure, to raise the empirical approach to life to the level of respectable philosophical method.

One such evidence is the tremendous influence of the Englishman John Locke on American political and social thought in the 18th century. Jefferson's letters and speeches are peppered with evidences of this American preference for the practical and the pragmatic. Samuel Johnson, an early American philosopher and first president of King's College (which was to become Columbia University) wrote that philosophy should be considered "not as a system of curious and idle speculations, but as a practical principle of discipline firmly possessing the heart and incessantly exerting itself in the life." (Samuel Johnson qtd. in Schneider, 1930).

This American drive toward the empirical and the practical motivated philosophers who preceded Dewey on the scene—Josiah Royce, Charles Peirce, and William James. Some of their contemporaries—professional philosophers steeped in the classical tradition—sneered that Royce, Peirce, and James weren't "real philosophers"—but it has been many years indeed since such an allegation has been made.

Dewey followed upon, expanded, clarified, and amplified the contributions of these men, and of their predecessors and lesser contemporaries. He was distinctly in and of the American tradition. His contribution was not

nearly so much innovation as it was the skillful formulation and powerful demonstration of a method, a rationale for the empirical investigation and appraisal of ideas. If his *Reconstruction in Philosophy* is, as I have indicated, a milestone and signpost on the road philosophers travel, his *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry*, published twenty years later, is a manual of navigation without which few contemporary philosophers would venture into still unexplored philosophical seas. I believe that it is not an overstatement to summarize by saying that Dewey's major contribution was to make explicit and philosophically workable that which had always been inherent and implicit in the liberal American tradition.

The undeniable power of Dewey's formulations has won for him and for his position the respectful attention even of those who disagree with him most wholeheartedly. In fact, it is doubtful that there is any philosopher of this century who enjoys such universal respect and admiration from his fellow philosophers of all shades of persuasion as does Dewey. (And, it might be added here, Dewey himself, while entirely capable of making a vicious left-jab at an idea which he found dishonest, a position which he found specious, a conclusion which he believed inconsequential, never, so far as I can ascertain, stooped to argumentum ad hominem, and never failed in good nature, courtesy, and consideration of his opponents as persons. To the end of his life he entertained both personal affection and professional regard for men who, in the arena of ideas, were his outspoken and indefatigable opponents; and they, in their turn, indicated their admiration and affection for Dewey.)

Indeed this affection and admiration sometimes gets out of bounds. There have, unhappily, been those who have sought to apotheosize Dewey and who constitute themselves his "disciples."

When I run across a "Dewey disciple," I know without the need to make any further investigation that I've found a person who has failed to understand the thesis that stands at the center of all Dewey's writing. In a method which insists that any idea must be subject to re-examination when circumstances warrant, and that all ideas must be appraised and reappraised with reference to their consequences in human experience, there can be no place for a "master" whose teachings are to be "believed in." In such an approach to life, there is no place for discipleship.

The existence of "disciples" and the adulation they insisted upon heaping upon their idol was perhaps the heavi-

est cross Dewey had to bear in his later years. It grieved him that people could so completely misunderstand what he had labored so arduously and over so long a period to make unmistakably clear. I recall an occasion on which Mrs. Dewey was commenting heatedly on the crass misrepresentations of one of Dewey's philosophical positions which were contained in a series of articles that were appearing at the time. John raised his hand and motioned for Mrs. Dewey to calm down. "You know by this time, Robbie," he mumbled, "that I don't worry about what my enemies say about me." Then he added, almost in an undertone, "But God protect me from my friends!"

It is only these self-appointed "disciples" who assume that Dewey provided a system of final answers for our problems—or even that he gave final and definitive form to the method by which we investigate them. Dewey himself would be the first to insist that human experience has not been—and probably cannot be—codified to the extent that final, or even continuously workable, answers are possible. About a year ago there was an article in the *Saturday Review* by Professor Jerome Bruner of Harvard, entitled "After John Dewey, What?" And while parts of the article suggested that Professor Bruner had failed to grasp the full import of Dewey's position on certain educational issues, no one who knows Dewey—and Dewey himself least of all—could quibble with the argument that the emerging educational scene involves conditions with which Dewey did not deal in his writings, and that there is need for some rather drastic revision in educational theory, and for a vigorous and original attack on problems which are baffling in the extreme. It is certainly no dishonor to Dewey to admit that we need to confront problems with which he did not concern himself. It is not even dishonor to him to entertain the hypothesis that the very method of inquiry which he elucidated may need to be reconstructed, or even superseded. But I submit that a better method is not likely to be evolved except by those conversant with and practiced in the method which he advanced, so that their innovations, like his own, can be evolutionary, built upon what is sound in our tradition as he built upon what was sound in his tradition.

I wish there were time for me to talk about Dewey's trips to, and influence upon education, thought, culture, and social institutions in, Russia, Japan, Turkey, China, Mexico, and other countries. Perhaps some of you heard Dr. Hu Shih's Tuesday evening address three years ago this summer, in which he credited Dewey with being the instigator of the intellectual renaissance which has swept China. I hope that many of you will have the opportunity in the future to read the doctoral

dissertation which one of my former students will be writing next year, in Japan, in which he plans to assess Dewey's influence of Japanese education.⁴

I wish there were time for me to take up Dewey's magnificent role in the investigation of the charges against Leon Trotsky; his fierce and fearless polemics at the time of the Stalinist purges in Moscow; his constant and tireless involvement in local and national politics; his thoughtful and influential practical and theoretical contributions to international relations. I wish I could go more deeply into the revolution that he brought about in aesthetic theory and art criticism. I wish I could share with you the charm that shines through the long and thoughtful letters which he so generously showered upon correspondents in all walks of life. I could speak on Dewey for five hours—and we have not even minutes remaining. I hope I have helped some of you (understand) the many-sided greatness, the courage, the incalculable influence (of Dewey) upon our world and mind of our age, our time.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ John Dewey, *Lectures in China, 1919–1920*. (1973). Edited and translated by Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-Chen Ou. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- ² Letter 18462. Robert Clopton to Roberta Lowitz Grant Dewey, May 24, 1962. "If I thought that the attached after dinner speech would ever see the light of print, I'd wait and send you a reprint for your collection of articles about and tributes to John. Since publication is such an extremely remote possibility, however, I'm sending you a thermofax copy, in the hope that it may prove a pleasant reminder your stay in Hawai'i more than a decade ago."
- ³ Victor N. Kobayashi, (1964). *John Dewey in Japanese Educational Thought*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Comparative education dissertation series (University of Michigan. School of Education) ; no. 2.
- ⁴ The text is added here by the editor of this journal, as some text from the original copy is missing.