

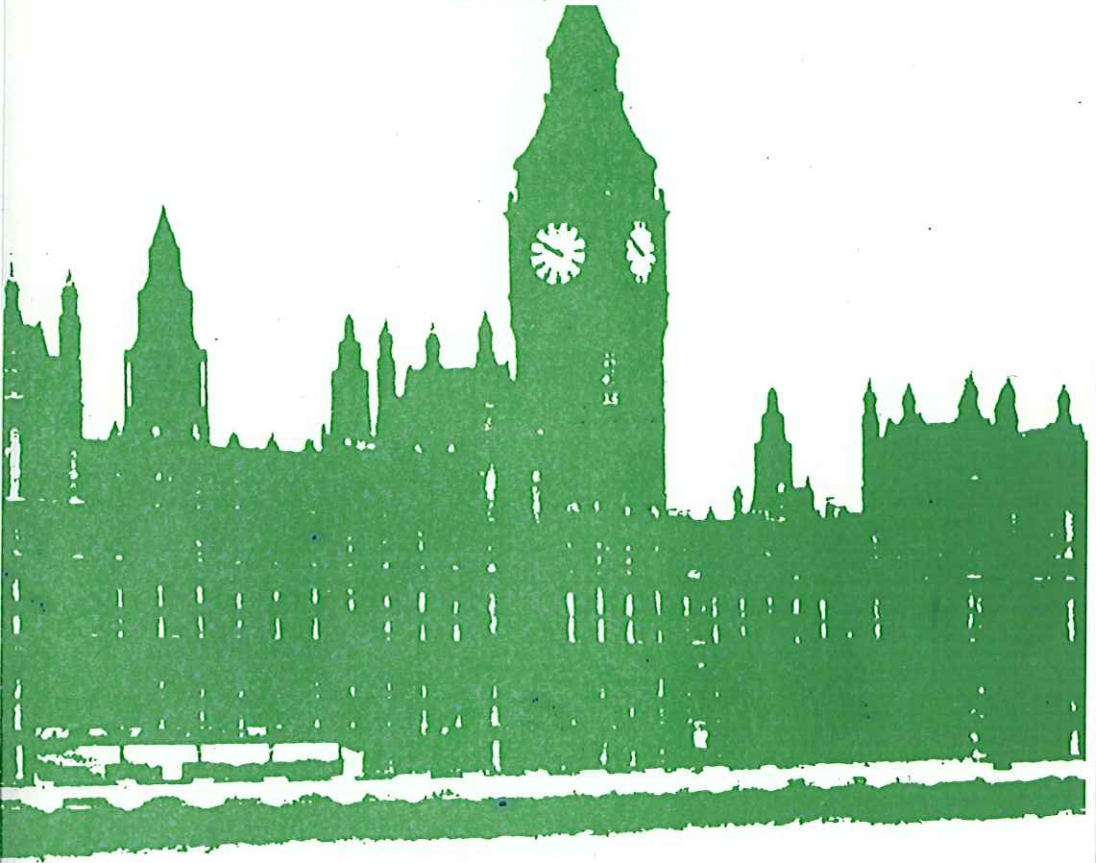


Policy Study No 126

# Father of child-centredness

John Dewey and the  
ideology of modern education

Anthony O'Hear



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES



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ideology of modern education**

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**8 Wilfred Street, London SW1E 6PL  
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# Introduction

It is easy enough to consider John Dewey's educational ideas and to criticise them on various educational grounds. During the course of this pamphlet, I will be doing just that. It will become clear that in Dewey's writing and practice we have a whole ideology of education: one which has taken deep root in our schools and in our colleges and departments of education. The ideology, of course, is not confined to Dewey, nor did child-centredness in a general sense originate with him. As a specific approach to educational practice, it begins with the romantic fantasies of Rousseau, and was developed in the writings of Pestalozzi and Froebel well before Dewey. Dewey, indeed, represents an improvement on those thinkers in that he was far more conscious than they were of the social dimensions of the process of education even though, in the end, his ideas are no more conducive to true educational values than theirs.

Subsequently, too, influential writers such as Illich and Reimer have given their own particular political twist to ideas which have their origins in Dewey. Nor, in coming to an overall assessment of current thinking about education, should the influence of Piaget and Kohlberg be overlooked. Their notions of successive and more-or-less inflexible stages of cognitive and moral development have helped to lead educational administrators and planners to underestimate the capability of children at various stages of development.

Nevertheless I concentrate here on Dewey not just because of his own immense personal influence, but above all because his writings more than those of anyone else condense and crystallise the complex of ideas which underlie so much of current educational practice in this country, in the maintained sector at least.

Criticism of Dewey's educational ideas is worthwhile and necessary. But cut off from their grounding in the rest of his philosophy, these ideas may well seem no more significant than any other fashion which captures minds of a particular profession. In fact, though, they are symptomatic of a whole philosophy of life — dismissive of what has been learned in the past, and seeing all problems in rationalistic, quasi-scientific terms. It is, of course, a philosophy which is congenial to many of the most influential currents of opinion of our time, to both socialism and liberalism. So I will begin by saying a little about Dewey's general approach to life

and to values; in doing so, I may be able to explain their widespread appeal, and also to deepen and enrich my criticisms of his philosophy of education.

## 1.

# Dewey's life and career

John Dewey was born in 1859 in Vermont and lived until 1952. For much of his lifetime he was the most influential philosopher in the United States of America, as well as being a key figure in education throughout the world.

After study at the University of Vermont, he taught in high schools, before returning to undertake further philosophical study at Johns Hopkins University, where he encountered C. S. Peirce, perhaps the most original philosophical intelligence ever produced by America<sup>1</sup>. Dewey, though, also came under the influence of G. S. Morris, a Hegelian. From the pragmatist Peirce, Dewey learned to see life and knowledge in terms of problem-solving; from Morris and Hegel, Dewey derived a sense of the organic inter-connectedness of all things, and of the artificiality and provisional nature of conceptual and other boundaries within the processes of life.

From 1884 to 1894, Dewey taught philosophy at the University of Michigan. Here his interests broadened into the areas of empirical psychology and sociology. He began to feel a need to study the actual processes of thinking and learning, and not just their results. He wrote several books on psychology. Here, too, he was a colleague of G.H. Mead, the sociologist, and became convinced of the importance of the social determinants of the individual self.

In 1894, Dewey was appointed chairman of the department of philosophy, psychology, and education at the University of Chicago. At Michigan, he had begun to interest himself in politics and in education, and these interests burgeoned in Chicago. He took part in discussions with workers and political radicals, as well as with academic colleagues on the implications of industrialisation and large-scale immigration. Even more significantly for our purposes, he helped found what came to be known as the Dewey School, a

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1. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of pragmatism and highly influential in the development of logic. For a while attached to Johns Hopkins University, from 1887 onwards he lived on private means, with no academic attachment. Always an original and independent thinker, his own philosophy underwent several stages of development, including the eventual repudiation of what came to be thought of as pragmatism.

pedagogical 'laboratory', in which he tried out his educational theories. In 1900, he published *The School and Society* (quoted here in the Phoenix Books edition of 1963 and referred to as SS), and *The Child and the Curriculum* in 1902 (quoted here in the Phoenix Books edition of 1963 and referred to as CC). He left Chicago for Columbia in 1904, partly because of disagreements with the Chicago University administration over the laboratory school. Despite this, by 1904, Dewey was firmly established in America as a leading educational and philosophical thinker.

Dewey remained at Columbia until his retirement in 1930. Through his philosophical works and *The Journal of Philosophy*, which was (and still is) edited from Columbia, Dewey achieved national and international fame. Through the Columbia Teachers' College, his educational philosophy became disseminated throughout the world. His main mature writings on education are *Democracy and Education* of 1916 (referred to here as DE, in the Free Press edition of 1966) and the later *Experience and Education* of 1938 (referred to here as EE, in the Collier Books edition of 1963). In the latter book Dewey attempts explicitly to distance himself from what he came to see as the wilder excesses of progressive education.

Dewey himself lectured throughout the world, notably in China and Japan, from 1919-21. During his later years he was widely honoured and sought after, academically, politically and educationally. He conducted educational surveys of Turkey, Mexico and Japan. In 1937, his status as a world figure was recognised when he chaired a commission in Mexico to investigate the truth or otherwise of the charges made against Trotsky in Moscow. (*Not Guilty* appeared in New York in 1937.) In 1941, Dewey publicly defended Bertrand Russell against his banning by City College, New York. Dewey's own bibliography extends to over 150 pages, and includes works on philosophy, education, psychology and politics. For many years he was a regular contributor to *New Republic*. It is no doubt because of his polymathic learning, combined with his passionate and left-leaning involvement in political and social issues that we read in the entry on Dewey in the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* that 'more than any other American of his time, Dewey expressed the deepest hopes and aspirations of his fellow man. Whether dealing with a technical philosophical issue or with some concrete injustice, he displayed a rare combination of acuteness, good sense, imagination and wit'.



## 2.

# Dewey's philosophical background

Dewey's own philosophy is a synthesis of Hegelian thought with a practical and empirical strain.

Dewey never forgot the lesson he had learnt from Hegel that nature, society and the individual mind are all linked in a quasi-organic fashion. Whilst we make divisions and distinctions of various sorts, the categories and notions we thereby light on are torn from a living, organic process. According to the Hegelian Dewey, we should always be striving to see distinctions as provisional and ripe for overcoming, and always ready to re-integrate whatever we see as isolated into the whole from which it derives its true life and sense.

From American pragmatism in general and Peirce in particular, Dewey derived his analysis of life, knowledge and experience in terms of problem-solving. An organism, initially at ease with its environment, has a problem, such as lack of food. After useful activity on its part, the difficulty is overcome, and the organism reaches a new state of equilibrium, in which it rests until confronted by a new problem or disequilibrium.

In the case of conscious creatures, such as human beings, we become aware of our environment only through some 'temporary strife' (as Dewey puts it) between ourselves and what surrounds us. Sparked into action, our minds then try to devise ways of solving our problem. Just as ideas and hypotheses arise initially because of a felt need, so we test them in practice, seeing whether they solve the given problem, and, if it arises from or bears on our living in community with others, examining whether our proposed solution commands the assent of our fellows.

Knowledge and thought, then, for Dewey is never properly a matter of contemplation. Except where it is idle fantasising, it is always an attempt to solve a real, practical problem, and to be judged in terms of its success in doing so.

Dewey always emphasizes the importance of the process over the product. This is because he never regards any solution as final. Each problem solved, each new state of equilibrium, is only an opening for a new problem, a new state of disequilibrium. In living our lives, what counts is our ability or skill in dealing with new problems not in the

mere fact that we may have hit (possibly accidentally) on the solution to an old problem. Thus the problem-solving approach leads Dewey to a stress which has clear educational and moral implications. In a characteristic passage (in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Boston, 1948, p.177), he writes:-

the process of growth, of improvement and progress rather than the static outcome and result becomes the significant thing . . . The end is no longer a terminus or limit to be reached. It is the active process of transforming the existent situation. Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim of living. Honesty, industry, temperance, justice, like health, wealth and learning, are not goods to be possessed as they would be if they expressed fixed ends to be attained. They are directions of change in the quality of experience. Growth itself is the only moral end.

Although Dewey and Peirce agreed in stressing the centrality of problem-solving to intellectual life, it is worth noting that their attitudes to pretty well everything of importance were radically different. In Peirce's thinking there was a strong mystical, even religious strain. Human problem-solving and the community of rational enquirers were in the end a means by which God or the universe itself becomes self-conscious. In their best endeavours, human enquirers are to be motivated by a disinterested love of the good for its own sake, and their intellectual endeavours are underwritten by some divine evolutionary force. On human consciousness in general and scientific problem-solving in particular, Peirce has this to say:-

No reader of the journal *Science* is likely to be content with the statement that the searching out of the ideas that govern the universe has no other value than that it helps human animals to swarm and feed. He will rather insist that the only thing that makes the human race worth perpetuation is that thereby rational ideas may be developed, and the rationalization of things furthered.<sup>2</sup>

For Dewey, by contrast, problem-solving and growth is all about

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2. From Peirce's 'Review of Clark University 1889-99' in *Science*, 1900, pp. 620-2.

human animals swarming and feeding. In contrast to Peirce's austere, if not curmudgeonly, intellectual elitism, Dewey holds that the worth of a form of social life is to be assessed in terms of the extent to which the interests of the group can be shared by all its members and communicated to other groups. In twentieth-century spirit, Dewey transforms what for Peirce was ultimately a doctrine of the intellectual love of God into a recipe for a utilitarian and egalitarian social and educational project. In contrast to Peirce, Dewey is indeed, an apostle of modernity.

### 3.

## The apostle of modernity

Dewey's style is rather old-fashioned, his mode of argumentation leisurely. His writing has a homespun quality, particularly in his choice of examples, which will grate on some, but which others may find endearing. His thought, too, often appears homespun, lacking references to other writers; to a degree striking in one who continually advocates collective endeavour, Dewey gives the impression that his thought emerges from his own mental resources, owing little to the efforts of others.

Superficially the contrast between Dewey and contemporary American philosophy could not be greater. The latter, at least in the analytical tradition, tries to present itself as natural science. It is bespattered with footnotes, references, symbols, technicalities, subdivisions and festooned with the apparatuses of logic and set-theory. It is determined to make itself unreadable to the reflective man in his quiet quarter of an hour. It is off-putting to anyone who has not mastered its language and the language of mathematical logic — this even when dealing with matters, such as ethics or aesthetics, where a knowledge of logic and mathematics might not seem crucial.

I do not want to pretend that Dewey is easy to read. It is hard to read him seriously, precisely because of the woolliness and vapidness of his style, and his affectation of a sublime reasonableness. He affects always to have attained a philosophical position which transcends the various extremisms and false dichotomies of which all his predecessors were supposedly guilty. From his point of eminence, he feels no need actually to read or scrutinize the works of his predecessors in any detail. But the result is no Zarathustra dancing nimbly over the mountain-tops of human thought; what we have rather resembles the lucubrations of an auto-didact from some outpost of the mid-West, who has done well in business and his local community: lucubrations written large and long, ever so long.

The difference in style notwithstanding, there is at a deep level continuity between Dewey and many of his philosophical successors in America, such as Carnap and Quine and those whom they have influenced. They are united in their belief in science, in their belief in the unity of knowledge and in the artificiality of disciplinary

boundaries, in their belief in progress, in their unfriendliness to ideas and feelings which cannot be fully and freely communicated regardless of cultural context, in their belief in the power of human minds collectively to solve the problems with which it is confronted, and above all in their belief that the great moral, spiritual and metaphysical dilemmas which arise from the predicament of being human can profitably be addressed as problems to be solved. Accompanying this scientific approach to life in general and to education in particular, we find in Dewey and his successors an emphasis on the present and the future at the expense of the past; or, rather, a feeling that the past is valuable and worth studying only to the extent that it throws direct light on the concerns of the present and our immediate future.

## 4.

# Biology and the theory of evolution

In his own thinking, Dewey places what he had learned from Hegel about the unity of existence and from Peirce about problem-solving into the context of a generalised theory of evolution. Seeing life and experience in terms of problem-solving, he analysed problem-solving itself in terms of adaptation to one's environment. Living things, he says, try to turn the energies which act upon them — and which may crush them — into means for furthering their own future existence. Growth is the exploitation of one's environment to the promotion of one's survival. Living requires constant adaptation to the environment and constant re-adaptation of the environment to one's needs. When we look at the past, in the geological record, for example, we see myriads of species which failed to adapt. Those which do adapt do so in increasingly complex ways. From the evolutionary perspective, anything that does not directly bear on the solution of present problems is irrelevant and can be ignored: indeed, in Dewey's view, it is better ignored, lest a past solution to a past problem drags one down in the struggle to find a present solution to a present problem or a future solution to a future problem.

If, as Dewey suggests, we regard everything important in life in terms of practical problems to be solved, then everything in the world will in turn seem like material to be used, manipulated, or turned to advantage. No experience will be regarded as valuable in and for itself, but only in so far as it brings about a change in the organism which enables it to exercise some new form of control over the environment. 'Education', he says, 'is not infrequently defined as consisting in the acquisition of those habits that effect an adjustment of an individual and his environment . . . but it is essential that adjustment be understood in its active sense of control of means for achieving ends.' (DE, p.46). Dewey does speak frequently of education in terms of growth, but in his eyes growth is something analogous to biological development, the ability to adapt oneself to one's environment and one's environment to oneself.

It is for this reason that Dewey is so dismissive of those who see education in terms of transmitting to the young the spiritual and intellectual heritage of the past. What has that to do with solving the

problems thrown up by one's environment? 'The great advantage of immaturity, educationally speaking, is that it enables us to emancipate the young from the need of dwelling in an outgrown past.' (DE, p.73) The past may be trawled for aids to solving present problems, but otherwise it is a distraction — or, worse, a refuge — from the present. The present 'is what life is in leaving the past behind it.' (DE, p.75) The implication is that it is better we leave the past behind us, and unstudied, except where that study has some direct bearing on present problems and their solution.

Dewey's attitude to the past and its works is may be correct when we are dealing with the natural sciences. Past scientific theories are indeed dead, and often best forgotten, if all we are interested in is manipulation of the environment and prediction of the course of nature. Similarly, in the biological world what counts is present adaptation to present environments; in the struggle for survival, old adaptations are of no significance as the circumstances to which they were adaptations no longer exist. But, against Dewey, the human world does not consist simply of increasingly sophisticated attempts to chart and manipulate nature, nor of solving environmental problems, however widely conceived these are. Indeed, most of what we do has nothing to do with problem-solving or environmental adaptation. It has far more to do with the discovery and recovery of meaning in our lives; and for this task acquaintance with and respect for the traditions through which meanings are channelled to us is essential.

As an example of a channel of meaning, let us consider the tradition of Western classical music. Here is a medium of expression which has developed over five or six centuries. No one who is not established in its principles — who is not saturated with its language, so to speak — will be able either to listen to its works with understanding or to compose new works other than those which clumsily rediscover what is already known through the genius of his predecessors. But someone who is familiar with its language (that is, having a sensitive knowledge of its history and its masterpieces) will have open to him an unparalleled range of expressive potentiality. It would be absurdly restrictive to suggest that a present-day musician need not bother to listen to the works of Bach, whereas it would be far from absurd to omit Aristotle's observations and problems from a present-day astronomy curriculum. Bach's works are a pivotal part of what we now understand by classical music; by contrast, Aristotelian

physics and astronomy play no role in contemporary science, however interesting they may be as part of the history of ideas.



## 5.

# Problem-solving and child-centred education

From his earliest writings on education (which reflect his experiences in the progressive school in which he was involved) to the supposedly revisionist text *Experience and Education* of 1938, Dewey insisted on linking meaningful education with the child's own attempts to solve problems arising from his own experience. Traditional education is constantly criticised for producing barren symbols and flat residue of real knowledge which have no organic connection or direct relationship with the child's experience. In *The Child and the Curriculum* of 1902, Dewey makes the dubious claim that the subject matter of real science relates to the life-experience of the scientist, to which a critic might reasonably respond that this is true only to the extent that the scientist has made the subject-matter of science part of his own experience. And surely, what the adult scientist can do the child can begin to do too — and must, if we have any interest in producing young scientists. For Dewey, however, meaningful education (and science) must be based in the extra-curricular life of the child. According to *The School and Society* of 1899, we must not forget that all subject-matters, including science, are simply selections from the social life of the past and are no more than answers to former social needs. Thus:-

(their) full meaning in the life of the child (is) secured only when the studies (are) presented ... from the standpoint of the relation they bear to the life of society ... to become integral parts of the child's conduct and character they must be assimilated, not as items of information, but as organic parts of his present needs and aims — which in turn are social. (SS pp.100-1)

This is an extraordinarily manipulative, instrumentalist account of science, of education, and indeed of the human mind and life. And it is accentuated in *Experience and Education*, with a further twist whereby the present needs and aims which are said to form the basis of true education are analysed in terms of both local and widely-

sharable experiences. After criticising traditional education for making no demand on the teacher to become intimately acquainted with local conditions, we read that 'a system of education based on the necessary condition of education with experience must ... take these things constantly into account.' (EE p.40) In the new Deweyesque type of school, work is conceived as 'a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute', in which 'all are engaged in communal projects'. (EE pp.56 & 58) The duty of the teacher is so to arrange things that the class is formed into a communal group, intent on solving problems arising from the life in which all share outside the school; the teacher is not an 'external boss or dictator' imposing on children some curricular standards alien to their current lives, but rather the 'leader of (their) group activities'. (EE p.59)

It is interesting that in 1938 Dewey feels able to present himself as a moderate in education, steering a mid-path between the rigidities of traditional liberal education (subject- and teacher-dominated) and the anarchistic excesses of the progressive free-for-all. He thinks that just by stressing the role of the teacher — by emphasizing the need for the teacher to arrange things in the classroom so as to maximise participation in class activities — he is distancing himself from uncritical progressivism in educational thought. This may be so, and it is true that he did recognise the need for direct instruction in processes such as reading and numbering, but it cannot be said that he does anything very much to restore the traditional conception of the teacher as an authority, with knowledge to impart to uneducated minds. Quite to the contrary, it was in *Experience and Education* that Dewey insisted that:

the teacher's suggestion (sic) is not a mould for a cast-iron result, but is a starting point to be developed into a plan through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process. (EE p.72)

In this disparagement of didacticism, and (implicitly) of using material available only to some of those involved in the learning process, Dewey is simply echoing central themes in his major educational treatise, *Democracy and Education* of 1916. My conclusion is that though Dewey himself *might* have drawn back from, say, a 'real books' approach to the teaching of reading, those who view the teacher as a 'facilitator' rather than as an authoritative source of

knowledge in the classroom can find even in Dewey's later writings plenty of support for this position.

## 6.

# *Democracy and Education*

According to *Democracy and Education*, traditional schools substitute a bookish, pseudo-intellectual spirit for a social spirit. They may secure specialised technical abilities in algebra, Latin or botany, but 'not the kind of intelligence which directs ability to useful ends'. (p.39) True learning, by contrast, produces skills which are transferable (in the modern jargon), socially useful and eminently sharable. The value of an activity or of a form of social life is judged by how far it is shared by all the members of the group in which it takes place, and by how far the group which generates it interacts with other groups. The reasoning behind these criteria may seem innocuous enough. Any activity is improved the more experiences are brought to bear on it. If bringing in more experiences is understood in a qualitative sense, as meaning that more genuinely different points of view are brought to bear, then what Dewey says may contain some truth, and the quality of discussion and analysis may be improved, for example, when dealing with a philosophical or scientific question. It is clear, though, that Dewey does not intend 'more' in a qualitative sense, but in a strictly quantitative one, whereby any experience is valuable in itself whatever its form or content; the effect of Dewey's doctrine is to make international pop music, Levi's jeans and Coca-Cola equal to and perhaps greater than what are normally regarded as the pre-eminent achievements of civilisation.

Dewey is, in fact, fundamentally hostile to divisions of quality, culture and class, seeing them as barriers to that demotic sharing of interests and mutual transparency of communication which for him is characteristic of true democracy, true culture and true education. Any division between the learned and the unlearned, he sees as due to a selfish hemming-off of one class from another. Any production of works or thoughts which cannot be fully and freely communicated to all men, he sees as symptomatic of a rotten, selfish and spiritual society, 'spiritual' being for him a term of abuse. Any insistence on the singularity of a national or local culture against cosmopolitanism (multi-culturalism), he sees as offending humanity, a crime of which all systems of education up to now are guilty. (cf DE pp. 98 ff).

Education, then, is for Dewey either a means by which boundaries

can be set up and reinforced, or a means of breaking them down. Education can erect boundaries of various sorts, between classes of men, between distinct subjects of study, between élites and non-élites, between nations. But if we fully appreciate our common needs as human beings and the importance of solving our problems together and of democracy as a mode of living in which experiences are shared as widely as possible, we will look to education to break down stratifications and distinctions of all sorts. While Dewey defines culture as the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perceptions of meanings, it is clear that he is really more interested in the former — range in terms of the numbers of people with whom one shares perceptions, rather than accuracy. Arguing against the identification of culture with the possession of something inner, he writes:-

the idea of perfecting an 'inner' personality is a sure sign of social divisions. What is called inner is simply that which does not connect with others — which is not capable of free and full communication. What is termed spiritual culture has usually been futile, with something rotten about it, just because it has been conceived as a thing which a man might have internally — and therefore exclusively.' (DE p.122)

I do not know whether Dewey fully realised the consequences of his view: that it would make much of the culture of the middle ages futile and rotten, to say nothing of the writings of, say, Pascal, Kierkegaard and T.S. Eliot. His views on sharability and his belief that material is humanised to the extent that it connects with the common interests of human beings would also render 'rotten' the science of Einstein, the philosophy of Kant and the painting of Cézanne. Perhaps he did have a glimmering of this consequence, however, and perhaps he was even prepared to accept it, for he inveighed against artists and scientists whose:-

feelings and ideas are turned upon themselves, instead of being methods in acts which modify conditions. Their mental life is sentimental: an enjoyment of an inner landscape. Even the pursuit of science may become an asylum of refuge from the hard conditions of life — not a temporary retreat for the sake of recuperation and clarification in future dealings with the world. The very word art may become associated not with

specific transformations of things . . . but with stimulations of eccentric fancy and with emotional indulgences. (DE pp.135-6)

It is clear to me that Dewey was fundamentally a philistine in matters of both art and science; that he saw all culture in reductionist and instrumentalist terms (as growth, as problem-solving, as adaptation), without any real interest in the content of either scientific theory or work of art; and that he would not have shrunk from the mediocrity which must follow upon any general acceptance of his views on democracy and education.

Dewey's reductionism regarding content is manifested in his assertion that 'in the last analysis, all that the educator can do is to modify stimuli' (DE p.180) so as to produce desirable intellectual and emotional dispositions in the pupil. I do not deny that the production of desirable dispositions is an aim of education; what is at issue here is whether they can be produced without the child being introduced to specific bodies of knowledge and experience. Can, for example, a child learn to do physics without studying the content of modern physical theory? From where else will he derive a sense of what a problem is in physics, or indeed, of its solution? Equally, can a child learn to draw or paint without being introduced either at first or second hand to the discoveries made by the great artists of the past in their masterpieces? Of the rules of perspective, say? The gaining of an intellectual disposition can be likened to the learning of a language in that both expression and discovery of new meanings depend on mastery of a pre-existing structure. And, as we learn from Aristotle, much the same is true of moral and emotional dispositions; it is only when we have learned to love the good and honour the noble that we can become practically wise, and loving the good and honouring the noble requires that we are taught which things are good and which actions noble — a knowledge of the content of morality, in other words.

Dewey, by contrast, is insistent that the teacher or, even worse, a book, is not to 'supply solutions ready-made' to pupils. (DE p.157) His opponents would agree that there is little to be said for filling the child's mind with information just for its own sake. But Dewey would reject *any* knowledge which cannot be busily and quickly put to use, doing something, improving social conditions, solving problems. For him unapplied knowledge is 'static' 'cold-storage', 'miscellaneous

junk' cluttering the mind and likely to impede truly educative processes.

It is hardly surprising that Dewey disparages the 'acquisition of information for purposes of reproduction in recitation and examination' (DE p.158) given his stress on what would today be called active learning, which leads him to speak of 'the child of three who discovers what can be done with blocks, or of six who finds out what he can make by five cents and five cents together' as 'really a discoverer'. (DE p.159) All thinking, he insists, is research, and all research is original with him who carries it on, even if everyone else in the world already knows what the researcher is looking for. (DE p.148) Dewey's critics can fairly point out that much of what on this view counts as research would be a most inefficient use of the researcher's time, forcing him to re-discover for himself myriads of things which are already known. More profoundly, they may question the possibility of conducting any research which does not emerge from a background of largely inactive knowledge against which the researcher makes his initial guesses as to the nature of a problem, the point of solving it, the likely solutions, the most economical methods for testing them.

Dewey overlooks the wealth of human experience and background knowledge involved in any human activity, and the extent to which much of this will be tacit: something transmitted only through contact with a more experienced worker in the field. Strangely for a thinker who puts so much stress on the communal nature of human activity, in developing what he calls his Copernican revolution in education, Dewey often takes an almost solipsistic view of the learner around whom all educational projects are to turn. A child must always think out his solutions for himself, the parent or teacher providing at most the conditions which stimulate thinking. In doing this, the teacher is as much a learner as the child. Even if the child recites a correct answer, he has not learned if he hasn't devised his own solution. Whether the 'solution' has to be right or wrong, Dewey does not feel it necessary to say, although his attacks on 'fixed' methods of teaching are surely indicative. (DE pp.160, 170)

The idea of each learner and each child as an original thinker, as a kind of miniature scientist researching into his own problems largely for himself, must tend to upgrade the intellectual value of early learning, and therefore downgrade the very real difference between that and the true originality which can exist only at high levels of

human endeavour. Was it because he was misled by his biological metaphors that Dewey overlooked the role of formal instruction in the transmission of human knowledge? For the human being, unlike an animal, does not confront environmental problems armed only with his biological inheritance of sense organs and genetically based responses and instincts; he can also draw on the knowledge of past generations which is encoded in language, books and other artefacts. The child, in short, does not have to be an original thinker. Far from being a negative consequence of human culture, this ability to instruct our young in what has been learned through human experience but which has not passed into our or their genes, has contributed mightily to human success and survival, and will continue to do so, provided we are not seduced by the Deweyesque notion of the child as a proto-scientific researcher, learning only through his own solutions to his own problems.

There is a connection between Dewey's view of the child as an original thinker and his attempt to use education and the curriculum as a means of establishing a radically egalitarian version of democracy. Democracy for Dewey is not as it is for Karl Popper, say, primarily a means of removing governments regularly and peacefully; it was primarily a matter of living together, sharing experience and fraternal problem-solving. He was splendidly unaware of the potential for collectivist bossiness, not to say tyranny inherent in such notions, and thus less interested than he should have been in that control of governments which is implied in the ability of the people to remove them.

Education, however, was certainly a political project for Dewey. Thereby we are all to learn about participation and communal problem-solving; hence the attacks on the inner life and on educational authorities. In the content of education, we are to concentrate on essentials, 'the things which are socially most fundamental, which have to do with the experiences in which the widest groups share' (DE p.191); hence the attacks on educational élites and assessments. In its crudest terms, what is not part of everyone's experience and problems, including those of children, is at best inessential in a democratic education, mere dead lumber from the past, and at worst a throw-back to a divided, class-ridden form of existence. But an education animated by a social spirit will be a prime means of building up a common experience in which all share, and which will break down distinctions between classes of men,



between subjects of study and between school and the world outside.

For Dewey the main aim of schooling is to build up a community life:-

In place of a school set apart from life as a place for learning lessons, we have a miniature social group in which study and growth are incidents of present shared experience. (DE p.358)

It is crucial to this project that the interests of the school connect with those of the community outside. Dewey does not seek a monastic or college atmosphere, is wary of any adherence in the school to the culture of the past. The modern world, its problems and the concerns of the future world are where the emphasis should be. This attachment to the experience of the present and to present problems leads him to denigrate the study of history and literature, except in so far as those subjects can throw light on the present. Such stress on present relevance actually takes Dewey as close as can be to a relativistic notion of truth:-

No matter how true what is learned was to those who found it out and in whose experience it functioned, there is nothing which makes it knowledge to the pupils. It might as well be something about Mars or about some fanciful country unless it fructifies in the individual's own life. (DE p.341, 2)

And in line with Dewey's biological approach to life and learning, what fructifies in the life of present individuals is not that which is true in some absolute or timeless sense, but that which enables them to modify their present experiences and social conditions in response to present unsettlement. Above all, we must realise that as long as a topic makes an immediate appeal to pupils, we need not ask what it is good for. It is good enough that it responds to some present interest of the pupil.

To satisfy our current biological and social needs, past authorities in education must be jettisoned. They are likely to make pupils unhappy with the modern world and to distract them from it. History and literature must be displaced from the centre of the curriculum in favour of social studies: the stress on classics and masterpieces in traditional education must be replaced by a scientific and experimental attitude, in which beliefs and values formed at first hand have far more validity than anything handed down by tradition.

With Dewey, this dismissive attitude went hand in hand with a belief in the power of unfettered and contemporary human reason to solve the problems we are confronted with, and also with a belief in the need to submit our activities — economic, educational, social — to collective central planning. It is impossible to over-emphasise the degree to which Dewey's educational views imply a specific view of man and of society; in criticising Dewey and the educational philosophy he has influenced, we will also be taking issue with the underlying anthropology and politics.

## 7.

# Dewey's educational practice

John Brubacher in his *A History of the Problems of Education* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1966) describes the laboratory school Dewey founded in Chicago in 1894 as follows:

Dewey thought it was an archaic practice for elementary schools to spend 75 to 80 per cent of their time on verbal studies. While such a proportion might have been proper before the invention of printing, in the twentieth century it amounted to forcing a middle- and upper-class education on the mass of the population. In place of such an education Dewey substituted one centering in . . . the current social occupations of the home and community with which the child was becoming increasingly familiar. Thus, Dewey's school started with household occupations. From here foods and textiles were later traced to the source of their production. Still later, occupations were seen in their historical setting. Number work was done incidentally to occupations like carpentry and cooking. Reading and writing began in the children's keeping of their own records. These and other activities were all conceived in a social context, for it was Dewey's idea that education was the regulation of a process whereby the child came increasingly to share in the social consciousness. (p.389)

Much of this could have been predicted on the basis of Dewey's writings; indeed, part of the practice is actually laid out by Dewey in *The School and Society* of 1900. Equally, the extent to which Dewey's practice seems unremarkable to us today shows how far ideas of the sort which he expounded so insistently have captured the less than commanding heights of educational theory during the course of our century. Deweyesque practice is contemporary practice in many of our schools, particularly in the maintained sector, where it is all but universal at primary and junior level; and Deweyesque theory is contemporary theory in the educational establishment of our country. But before demonstrating this it is worth observing that Dewey's own school started with 3 teachers for 32 pupils, rose to 16 teachers for 60

children and ended with 23 teachers plus 10 assistants for 140 children. Whether or not a child-centred education such as Dewey advocated is a good thing — and I shall argue that it is not — we cannot but agree with Dewey and his followers that an education based on the child, his interests and ever-changing personality, to be successful, is bound to be extremely labour-intensive. We should remember this point when we hear — yet again — that education is 'under-resourced'; conversely we might observe that there must be something very peculiar about a teaching system which fails to produce some impressive results when operating with the pupil-teacher ratios Dewey allowed himself.

## 8.

### Three contemporary snapshots

Dewey reports in *The School and Society* (p.31) that he found it very difficult to find the desks and chairs he needed for his University Elementary School in the Chicago of the 1890's. Finally, overlooking the fact that reading and writing are certainly types of work, one dealer said to him: 'I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening.' Even if the dealer could not supply Dewey with furniture, he gave him what he wanted philosophically in the admission that old-fashioned school furniture was not designed to enable pupils to move around the classroom at will. One hundred years later Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools lambasted Shakespeare's school, King Edward VI School at Stratford-on-Avon for its reliance on 'traditional' methods; they seemed particularly concerned because at Stratford many lessons were, in the old sense, didactic: but, even worse, in many of these lessons pupils were listening 'attentively' and even 'with evident enjoyment'. Instead of treating this observation and the excellent academic record of the school as an answer to Dewey's story, the Inspectors parrot Dewey in insisting that this attentive and enjoyable listening must stop: 'the needs of the pupils in the late 20th century require the introduction of new procedures, new methods and new courses'.

If the Inspectors repeat Dewey's revolutionary ideas of the 1890s as though they were established wisdom in 1989, Dewey's belief in the original research of 3 year olds find more than an echo in current teacher education. In a report in *The Guardian* (4.12.1990), Edward Pilkington wrote about the School of Education at Roehampton Institute, one of the principal institutions of teacher training in the country:-

Only five weeks into the course, (students) have begun to absorb the message that will be hammered home with monotonous regularity throughout their four years at Roehampton: children should not be told what to do, but encouraged to learn for themselves. Their tutor, Graham Welch, assistant dean of education, tells the class that the key to learning is play: 'You have to realise that everybody,

including big kids like us, learns through play.' This approach, rapidly becoming the norm in teacher training establishments and primary schools, stems from the idea that children learn at their own pace and according to their unique level of understanding. The traditional model of teacher standing in front of the whole class cannot work because the lesson will be too simple for some pupils, while leaving others behind. A more democratic and appropriate approach, says Roehampton, is to start with each child's understanding and develop from there. Thus the institute advocates that children should be given some control over how they spend their time in school, or in Roehampton-speak they should have the right to negotiate their own curriculum. 'Negotiated curriculum is an idea rooted in a concept of democracy', says Graham Welch. 'There is a lot of evidence to suggest that children as young as three are better motivated if they have a say in the way their day is organised.

It is not too hard to recognise the Deweyesque character of this talk of learning through activity and of pupils learning for themselves, or of its roots in what Welch claims is a concept of democracy. In common, though, with many places where there is much talk of democracy, negotiation and participation, at Roehampton, according to *The Guardian*, openness does not extend to the admission of pedagogical viewpoints other than those espoused by Dewey and his followers.

A third Deweyesque vignette from the contemporary educational landscape may be drawn from the interim report of the National Curriculum Working Group on Music, which offers the following prescription for music teaching:

Knowledge about music should be taught in the context of practical musical activities: that is, the needs of a particular task in listening, composing and performing should determine the facts to be taught. (Section 3.8)

That this statement should be offered without defence or comment — and similar statements may be found in discussions of all other subjects — shows how far Dewey's ideas on learning through practice and discovery, rather than through laid-down programmes of knowledge to be mastered, have come to dominate educational

thinking. So there is no need to be surprised that the authors of the music document place stress on pop and rock music of various sorts (after all, Dewey has taught us, has he not, that we need to modify traditional ideas of culture to respond to the demands of youth, and that as long as any topic makes an immediate appeal, we are not to ask what it is good for?) or that they make the apparently bizarre suggestion that children of seven or eight years old devise their own ways of notating sounds (for hasn't Dewey told us that childish spontaneity and experiment is of far greater experiential and educational worth than the absorption of information and solutions provided by others, teachers and the like?).

## 9.

# Dewey and contemporary educational practice

My three snapshots of the educational practice of our maintained sector of education were taken at random: incidents and reports which caught my interest recently. They are not random, however, in the sense of being unrepresentative of current practice. Everybody involved in English education will recognise them, and could provide similar examples from their own experience. My opponents might claim, however, that they were no more than anecdotes. I will now show systematically and schematically how ideas which Dewey argued for infuse what has good claim to be regarded as the official view of education in our country.

### (i) The teacher as provider of suggestions or 'facilitator'

This is standard. HMI reports are loud with criticisms of 'teacher-dominated' lessons at all levels of education. Primary-school practice plays down formal teaching and rote learning in favour of pupil activity and 'discovery'. If the GCSE is any guide, child-centred pedagogy is dominating secondary education as well, with considerable emphasis on pupils' projects. While Dewey himself is said not to have particularly favoured them, the introduction of pupil-selected and pupil-conducted projects is a logical extension of his stress on problem-solving and of his concept of the child as a researcher. Whether their 'research' is of any value, objectively speaking, is not an issue for Dewey, who always stresses process rather than product in education.

The GCSE has certainly made great demands on pupils' time. We should ask, though, whether they actually learn anything worthwhile from their GCSE projects, and whether they are at the expense of a systematic grasp of key subjects. We should also note that child-centred 'learning' in general, and project-work in particular, is often at the expense of the learning of facts, information and poetry. The standard reply — that actual learning is unnecessary in a world of books and



information technology — overlooks the fact that our mental and expressive landscapes are formed by what we actively know and can draw on, and not by what we might have access to if we press the right buttons.

(ii) **Group-work and hostility to individual difference**

Deweyesque pedagogy often proclaims itself interested in the individuality of each child. But this professed respect for individual difference is hardly consistent with the political project of the school as a miniature community, without internal divisions or classifications of quality, and in which every growing experience is regarded as having intrinsic significance. We must also remember that for Dewey the most valuable experiences are the most widely shared, and bear in mind his hostility to what cannot be shared. The natural consequence of these views is the comprehensive community school, which all pupils will attend, which will be organised in mixed-ability classes, and which will do its best to eliminate genuine differences between pupils. There will be examinations which all will take (the GCSE and the new style 18+ examination proposed by the Labour Party) and 'broad and balanced' curricula accessible to all. Projects will often involve group work (the GCSE again, TVEI, Enterprise Programmes), making assessment of individual performance problematic; in true collectivist spirit pupils who show dislike of group work, however, will be penalised in assessments, a depressing trend for those interested in the life of the mind, which (as Dewey correctly realised) entails solitary study and application.

(iii) **The sociologising of the curriculum and the breaking down of curricular boundaries**

Dewey insisted that the primary focus of study should be the social context in which various scientific and technological developments were made and in which works of art and literature were produced. He constantly criticises traditional pedagogy for overlooking the way the 'various bodies of external fact labelled geography, arithmetic, grammar, etc. . . . had been generated out of social situations and represented the answers found for social needs.' (SS p.100) In Dewey's own method even scientific studies will concentrate on the way

scientific discoveries related to social problems and transformed society, while, even more radically, 'the true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems.' (DE p.214) He recommends concentration on economic and industrial history, rather than political or military history:-

Economic history is more human, more democratic and hence more liberalising than political history. It deals not with the rise and fall of principalities and powers, but with the growth of the effective liberties, through command of nature, of the common man for whom powers and principalities exist . . . industrial history is essentially an account of the way in which man has learned to utilise natural energy . . . (DE pp.215, 6)

Dewey's emphasis on the social context of science and technology leads naturally to an interdisciplinary approach to science — and to other subjects too. In *The School and Society*, Dewey suggests how the whole history of mankind, and of technology, mathematics, science, geography, and much else besides might arise from a study of flax — a commonly-used, ready-to-hand material in his day. Children will go from one aspect of flax to another, as the whim takes them, and so pick up what is really useful in all the artificially separated disciplines.

A great deal of modern pedagogical practice echoes from Dewey's stress on the sociological roots of now-separated disciplines and studies, and on his insistence that in his schools non- or inter-disciplinary study will bear on present problems and present liberation. Dewey was not a feminist or an anti-racist, at least not in name, but much feminist and anti-racist practice can be justified in his terms: in turning the school curriculum to serve some real or imagined project of contemporary liberation. Equally the politicisation of geography, the attempts made to introduce social and historical dimensions into the study of literature and of science, and the demand for 'cross-curricular themes', so beloved of the Inspectors, the National Curriculum Council and the School Examination and Assessment Council, are all direct descendants of Dewey.

Cross-curricularity, though has a price; cut adrift from the standards of intellectual integrity painfully and laboriously worked out in the history of the separate disciplines, there is

little to prevent a cross-curricular treatment of pollution, say, or of mental health degenerating into a display of tendentiousness and political posturing on the part of pupils and 'facilitators' alike. In addition, just how can pupils *not* schooled in the various disciplines which bear on pollution or mental health be expected to select and assess their material with any knowledge or understanding? This crucial point is somewhat masked in the case of Dewey's flax investigators in their journeyings round their school because they are, of course, able to consult teachers trained in the various disciplines Dewey is recommending we bury, and into which pupils schooled in Deweyesque methods will not be introduced. Dewey's project and topic-based methods can work only given a generation of teachers trained in subjects and disciplines, a resource on which the next generation of pupils will not be able to draw.

(iv) **The demand for contemporary relevance in the curriculum**

Again contemporary relevance is such an *idée fixe* in contemporary educational thought that it is hardly necessary to cite examples. Section 19(k) of the General Criteria of the GCSE might, though, be mentioned as indicative:-

All syllabuses should be designed to help candidates to understand the subject's relationship to other areas of study and its relevance to the candidate's own life.

Dewey and those who think like him have had such an influence on educational thought over the last hundred years that it might seem simply perverse to question the contemporary emphasis on relevance. Dewey himself asserts bluntly that 'the teacher should be occupied not with subject-matter in itself but in its interaction with the pupils' present needs and capacities' (DE p.183); thus geography, for example, should be based not on the relationship which various facts bear to one another, but on the relationship the facts bear to the pupils' own house, bodily movements and friends.

Apart from Dewey's hostility to discrete subjects, his reason for thinking that learning in school should be based on 'personal occupations' is psychological and ultimately philosophical. He believes that unless teaching proceeds from the existing

knowledge and needs of the pupil, the pupil's interest will not be engaged and no real learning will take place. This, in turn, stems from his philosophical account of knowledge, whereby any genuine knowledge must arise from a problem which an organism has with the environment and result in some modification of the environment. Hence his insistence on 'active' learning and his hostility to 'passive' listening and the development of the inner life.

What evidence is there to show that any of this is true, except in the trivial sense that the learner's interest has to be engaged at some level? Far from being constrained by the physical and social circumstances in which they live, children's minds seem more than capable of considerable feats of imagination, many of which have nothing to do with problems in their immediate environment. The difficulty with children is not so much engaging their interest in ways that expand their imagination, as devising some sort of discipline for their imagination.

Why are educationalists so much less ambitious here than story-tellers, myth-makers, television producers and advertising agents? Until children have been introduced to a theme or an idea, one cannot tell just what will spark their interest or — in educational terms — what will prove to be relevant to their interest. Too often educational demands to keep the curriculum accessible to the child simply result in the inaccessible remaining inaccessible. And this is no small fault in a curriculum. The interests of a child are necessarily uneducated, and so cannot serve as the basis for a satisfactory curriculum. One primary justification for compulsory education is to expand the mental horizons of pupils, to acquaint them with things which are worthwhile in themselves, but which they would not otherwise encounter. Here is a principal reason to deplore Deweyesque curricula which concentrate on contemporary works and events (which cannot, in any case, be put into a proper perspective without a knowledge of the past and its often formidable masterpieces).

(v) **Multiculturalism**

We have seen that Dewey has a rooted hostility to national sovereignty, which he sees as 'secondary and provisional', a regrettable step on the road to a fuller, freer and more fruitful

mode of association between human beings. A democratic conception of education, involving 'a freeing of individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims' will naturally tend to undermine local and national loyalties.(cf DE p.100) Indeed, the intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions and unlike customs creates for all a 'new and broader environment'(DE p.21); it is one of the duties of the school to foster such intermingling, to ensure that each individual comes into living contact with a broader environment.

Dewey would be re-assured by proclamations such as that of the Music Curriculum Working Group that 'multicultural education has come to be recognised as the entitlement of all pupils', and by the assertions sometimes made by educators in the shire counties to the effect that multicultural education is even more vital in places where there is no cultural or racial mix than, say, in some inner cities.

It would be correctly inferred from the previous section that I am in favour of an education which seeks to broaden horizons in various ways. In a broad sense, then, I am very much in favour of multi-culturalism; but as currently promulgated it has at least two dubious aspects. The first is the overtly political nature of the project, in which education is being used as a tool in a social experiment, and used possibly on unwilling and unreceptive subjects. Dewey at least is open about this; some of today's enthusiasts for multiculturalism somewhat less so, despite the fact that many of their efforts seem designed to undermine a respect for the merits of our national history and culture, in which indeed they fail to give the young any satisfactory grounding at all.

And this takes us to the more fundamental objection to an education based from the start on a multicultural premise. While wanting education to aim at a broadening of experience, we have to recognise that any workable curriculum has to have limits and a form. Moreover one must have a reasonably secure grasp of one literary or artistic or religious tradition before being able to engage in fruitful explorations of other traditions. In the case of artistic media, we can refer back to our earlier comparison of music and language: that in order to grasp the significance and potentiality of one artistic tradition, one has to

experience and understand its meanings and rules from the inside. This form of understanding will be vitiated if a child is presented — haphazardly, superficially — with works from different traditions, torn from their embedding in their own culture. Much the same can be said for attempting courses in what is in effect comparative religion for those who have no real experience or knowledge of any one religion.

Finally, there is a certain sublimity in attempting to teach children in this country about life in ancient China or mediaeval India before they have some grasp of the order of events in Britain and Europe. All this is quite apart from the light which some knowledge of British and European history will shed on our present-day circumstances, and from the fact that in practice multi-cultural excursions into the exotic are often used as a means of denigrating indigenous history and culture.

(vi) **Anti-authoritative attitudes in education**

Dewey's insistence on the teacher being no more than the leader of group activities and his conception of the child as a little scientist point to the most insidious aspect of his educational legacy: his hostility to accepted authority, methods and learning. If Dewey found it objectionable when teachers and books supplied solutions 'ready-made', the Secondary Examination Council (now the School Examination and Assessment Council), advising on GCSE mathematics had this to say:

. . . traditionally mathematics has been about knowing the rules to deal with numbers, percentages, areas, equations, and so on. It has often been divided into arithmetic, algebra and geometry.

The GCSE, by contrast, should lead pupils to see that mathematics can be used to solve practical problems in everyday life.

One approach here is to let pupils explore their own ways of using what they know about numbers, shapes, and so on, rather than insisting that results are reached by one fixed, ideal method.

I do not know whether Dewey would have followed the

then SEC in the apparent implication that invalid methods might be just as good as valid ones in mathematics, or that empirical proofs are just as good as formal ones, but it would certainly be in line with his emphasis on experimental problem-solving and consequent disparagement of old methods, even ideal ones.

Certainly, Dewey's hostility to past authority runs deep:-

every advance in the influence of the experimental method is sure to aid in outlawing the literary, dialectic and authoritative methods of forming beliefs which have governed the schools of the past, and to transfer their prestige to methods which will procure an active concern with things and persons. (DE p. 339)

Again, Dewey insists on the supremacy of first-hand knowledge, and cautions against 'undue reliance' on custom in such matters as architecture, manufacture and agriculture. (cf DE p.294) In a democratic society, we will free ourselves from such intellectual servility, and each man will think everything out for himself, rather than take aims and ideas from the few set in authority.

Dewey's hostility to authority is of a piece with his biological approach to life and knowledge; in evolution old solutions and old authorities are in new circumstances likely to lead to destruction. It is also of a piece with his notion of the child as a mini- scientist, and as a potential critic of the old in the light of his own experience. It is also of a piece with so much contemporary thinking in education, where pupils' and students' opinions are rated more highly than the subjects they are supposed to be studying. According to Her Majesty's Inspectors, pupils are to be encouraged to treat poetry as a springboard for their own 'emoting', on the grounds that 'all writing connected with the experience of poetry is creative'. In the study of history, GCSE pupils are similarly to be encouraged to deploy the skill of evaluation of evidence, something that is hard even for knowledgeable historians, and ridiculous for those without a good background. Finally, and most revealing of all the SEAC, while proposing to halve the content of 'A' levels, insisted at the same time that — after 130 hours of study — pupils set about criticising the 'received notions and methodologies' of their chosen disciplines.

Like Dewey, the SEAC can hardly bear the thought that there exists in our culture some form of knowledge or experience which any teenager could not 'critically appraise' after a cursory introduction. But like Dewey, the SEAC and those who think like him misconceive the nature of the mind and of human culture. They are misled by metaphors taken from science and biology into seeing children as a proto-scientist or some inarticulate organism, attempting from their own experience to cope with some utterly new and unforeseen environmental problem. But this is simply not how we should think either of the child, or of his and her relationship to the surrounding world.



## 10.

# Man and Nature

Human beings are in one sense part of nature. They have evolved in the course of nature; and they and what they do may thus be seen as part of nature. Darwinian natural selection is the process by which species in the natural world develop and change.

What Darwinism means is that offspring inherit some combination of their parents' genes, and that these genes are present in the parent at his or her birth. What the parent does through life has no effect on the genes he transmits to his offspring: he may get a calloused hand through hard manual work through his life, but this in no way affects the likelihood of his child developing or inheriting a calloused hand. Hard manual work through life has no systematic effect on my genes or on what I will transmit to my children.

Lamarck, in contrast to Darwin, believed, contrary to fact, that acquired characteristics (such as my calloused hand) could and would be transmitted genetically to my offspring. But if Lamarck was wrong about natural selection, he was right about human culture. The main difference between the natural world and human culture is that in the latter acquired characteristics can be transmitted from parents to offspring. What I learn in my life from my experience I can pass on to my children; they can acquire skills and knowledge by imitating me and from my teaching. In human culture, acquired characteristics can be transmitted from parents to offspring. Human culture is, in an important sense, Lamarckian.

The principal means by which human beings transmit to their offspring the knowledge and skills they have acquired in their lives are the various symbol systems human beings have developed in their history. Of these, the most significant is undoubtedly language, which is itself transmitted through imitation and instruction. If I am not brought up in a human community, I will not speak at all (although I will do all sorts of things I am genetically programmed to do). I will learn the language of the community in which I am brought up, not some other language. And whatever pre-linguistic dispositions I might have, on which my language learning is based, it is clear enough that successful linguistic communication on my part requires that I simply adopt — unquestioningly and uncritically —

the majority of the speech dispositions of those around me. In a broad sense, in the Lamarckian sense, this is instruction from without, even though much language-learning may be based on informal imitation on the child's part rather than on formal teaching on the parent's part. (Indeed, it could not be the latter, as formal instruction is usually via language and so presupposes that the child has already picked up enough language for formal instruction.) Nevertheless, the child simply has to learn, unquestioningly, that 'chair' means chair and not pain, and that 'pain' means pain and not chair. The child who does not accept this, or who thinks it might be better the other way round is condemned to a life of grievously impaired communication, and will not benefit to the full extent from much of the instruction offered him.

In learning a language, the child begins to learn a way of life. He comes to make certain discriminations, to focus on certain aspects of his environment, to value some things more than others, to regard certain people close to him in certain special ways, and so on. All this forms such an obvious part of our social and linguistic background that we easily overlook the extent to which a huge measure of unspoken agreement about the world and what is valuable in it underlies our success in communicating with our fellow-speakers, in our case, of English. And this unspoken agreement is not something over which any of us has any choice. As Wittgenstein says, human beings agree in the language they use, and that is not agreement in opinions, but in form of life. Of course, from the point of view of the newcomer, this agreement in form of life does not present itself as such. He simply does as others do or as he is told. This is the condition of becoming a language-user in the full sense, a human being.

We can see language as one main channel through which forms of life are transmitted and developed, whose acquisition bears little resemblance to Dewey's problem-solving approach to learning. Even if language is sometimes used, very effectively by all means, to help us solve problems, its use presupposes straightforward acceptance of so much in which our elders instructed us formally or informally, and which we acquire mysteriously by imitating those around us. Indeed, our mental life — what we might call our mind — is very largely constituted by our deployment of dispositions, attitudes and reactions made possible to us by our entry into language and other forms of human life. Even in science, which Dewey takes as paradigm of

experimental rationality, the newcomer simply must learn a body of knowledge and acquire a complex of practical skills and attitudes well before he will be able to recognise a significant problem, let alone start to solve one.

Entering a human community involves taking on many of the shared standards of judgement and evaluation on factual, moral and aesthetic matters. Reasoning and experimentation become possible for the individual only once he has mastered the prevailing standards of reasoning. As numerous philosophical studies of scepticism have implied, our systems of knowledge and evaluation are not self-supporting, nor can they be justified by appeal to abstract principles of reasoning, although they can of course be undermined in the minds of the inexperienced and unwise by injudicious criticism and questioning. Too often educational imperatives, such as those inspired by Dewey, to have uneducated children test everything in the light of their own experience, overlook the extent to which our explicit assessments of true and false, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly necessarily operate against a largely unquestioned and implicit background of agreement in judgement. The fact that supposedly radical questioning of established norms itself is often no more than a mere parroting of assumptions simply serves to underline how much the exercise of human rationality is performed within a context of judgement itself unquestioned, simply accepted.

Dewey underestimates the extent to which the individual human problem-solver is necessarily a product of an unquestioned cultural inheritance. In his insistence on wiping away subject and disciplinary boundaries he overlooks the nature of that cultural inheritance, and the significance within it of the division of labour. For a single mind cannot look at everything at once nor at everything from every point of view. In the different disciplines of study and media of expression the whole from which human beings have emerged and of which they are undoubtedly a part is divided into manageable sections. This is not just a question of economy: physics represents a different way of approaching the world and its contents from literature, history involves a different perspective of reality from mathematics, music constructs worlds in sound, while painting offers us (among other things) representations of the natural world, and so on.

Dewey is right to emphasize that no subject is a hermetically sealed entity. He is also right to insist that there is a social whole within which the various different subjects exist, though looking at

things in that way is to look at them from the point of view of one particular subject, namely sociology. But he is wrong, and simply dogmatically asserting the hegemony of the sociological over all other points of view, when he implies that disciplinary boundaries are dispensable, or denies that the different disciplines are to a large degree autonomous. To look at a piece of music from the point of view of physics will be to overlook those precise qualities of sound which the listener values; the sociologist or historian will look at a piece of music in relation to other currents and events of its time, whereas a musician will be more interested in its technical musical structure; a psychologist might be interested in the psychological effects different types of music have on different types of listener, whereas the music-lover will endeavour to appreciate the expressive qualities that pieces of music have in themselves.

Asserting that disciplinary boundaries are real and significant does not mean that it is right to think of disciplines as timeless. Like languages, they evolve and have to be passed on to newcomers, but in evolving and in being passed on they help to form the minds of the human beings who participate in them. A human being schooled in modern physics is going to look at and question nature in a way quite different from a mediaeval scholastic thinker. Considering this, and other analogous examples, we can see that there is a definite sense in which their minds are quite different; our minds and casts of mind are, to a large extent, reflections of the forms of life into which we are introduced.

Dewey's hostility to traditional learning and to tradition in general stems from his belief that the child is or should be primarily concerned with working out his own answers to his own problems, and that the best way to do this is for teachers to encourage him to adopt a version, highly truncated, it must be said, of the scientific method. Many critics have correctly pointed to the fact that Dewey's problem-solving approach is not nearly as unauthoritarian as it seems: the teacher will doubtless be using all sorts of more or less overt means to ensure that the child will in fact identify and deal with problems in the approved way. But the pupil will pick up from all this a rationalistic approach to life and culture, which will serve him ill.

In the first place, he will be taught to discount custom and tradition. Such discounting flies in the face of much of the experience of this century. Dewey and his followers overlook the way in which any field of human activity (including the scientific, incidentally)

contains a mass of customary and traditional knowledge and skills, much of which has evolved spontaneously. They have not been adopted because people have understood their precise function or can justify their continuing existence. Sometimes, even, we are hardly aware of their existence. In scientific enquiry, for example, researchers, by being inducted into laboratory work, pick up a sense of what a significant problem or a relevant factor might be, without being able to formulate the sense. Often, too, we will not realise the true significance of a customary procedure until it is disturbed or abandoned in some way.

One of Dewey's own examples of an area from which custom and tradition should be expunged in favour of a rationalistic approach is architecture. Dewey did not have the benefit (if that is the right word) of our experience of modern architecture to see the fallacy of his proposal. It is precisely because modernistic architects dispensed with traditional building knowledge in favour of rational solutions to 'problems' that they succeeded in creating environments so often devoid of human comfort, meaning or charm — and of such elementary practicalities as durability, non-leaking roofs and efficient heating systems to boot. Modernistic agriculture (another of Dewey's examples) has also had catastrophic failures, arguably due to its repudiation of the customary and the traditional.

We should, then, particularly as educators, be far more respectful of the customary and the traditional than Dewey was; we should be open to the possibility, to put it no higher, that customs and traditions may well embody wisdom beyond our present powers of perception. We should also be far less ready than Dewey was to believe that all social problems are susceptible of rational solutions.

In education, we should induct our pupils into the traditional academic disciplines, recognising that these represent distinct approaches to the world and to experience, ones which have survived and continue to develop precisely because generations of human beings have found and continue to find them worthwhile. Finding an expressive medium, such as music, or a form of knowledge, such as history, worthwhile has little enough to do with solving problems in any biological or sociological sense. The emergence of language and other cultural forms has given us as human beings a range of activities and meanings which we pursue and develop for their intrinsic value, interest and delight. Some of these activities, indeed, such as history, art and philosophy may well throw light on what

might be called our predicament as human beings, and help us in a general sense to make our way through our life. But it would be utterly ridiculous to look upon Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* or Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or Beethoven's *Fidelio* as aids to solving problems of survival or of living together.

## Conclusion

Any half-way human system of education should have as a primary aim the introduction of the young to the masterpieces of our culture (such as those mentioned in the last chapter) in as didactic a way as is necessary, not because they might have a bearing on present problems, but precisely because they are likely to show us the insignificance of our present efforts and the superficiality of what in the present passes for wisdom. Looking at the masterpieces of the past may be the best possible antidote to that *hubris* about our present achievements that technology and scientific writers such as Dewey encourage. Some may find the cultural poverty of the present compared to some periods of the past depressing. For others it will be sufficient consolation to know that one belongs to the same species as Shakespeare, Raphael, Michelangelo and Beethoven, and to study their works, a consolation that might well be denied to many of those brought up in an education organised on Deweyesque lines.

Dewey and his educational ideas present an approach to education which is not merely coherent in itself, but which is based in a particular vision of man and his place in nature. During the course of this pamphlet I have shown some of the implications of Dewey's ideas on education, making point-by-point criticisms of them along the way; in the last section, I have shown that the underlying philosophy rests on a conception of man which fails to take into account either the nature or the significance of human cultural forms and their modes of transmission. To put it bluntly, Dewey treats us as something closer to members of an animal species, a-historically attempting to solve problems of immediate survival, than to the historical, culturally and linguistically endowed species we actually are.

Dewey's educational ideas — his Copernican revolution of centering education on the child, his notion of active learning, his view of education as a determinate socio-political project, his insistence on relevance, and the rest — all make sense given his view of man. But his view is demonstrably false. A proper understanding of human culture suggests a far more subject-centred and didactic approach to education than is currently fashionable. At least it suggests it if we are interested in opening to our children the channels of knowledge and experience to which they are properly heirs.

Educational practice today has adopted most of Dewey's nostrums, and in the name of child-centredness and immediate relevance is depriving thousands of our children of initiation into the best that has been thought and known. Realisation of the faulty ideological underpinnings of current educational practice should lead educators and policy-makers to undertake its radical review, so as to allow for a practice more sensitive to the realities of human nature and to the possibilities offered by human culture.

What I call for here is something far more than that — welcome as it is — concentration in teacher training on classroom practice, which is generally advocated to-day. I am calling for a reappraisal of classroom practice itself, so as to permit a more didactic, less child-centred, more authoritative, and less busy, less Dewesque style of teaching and learning in our maintained schools, secondary and primary.