LLOYD SUTTELL
Associate Professor of Education
University of Puerto Rico

INTELLIGENCE IN THE MODERN WORLD

(John Dewey: 1859-1952)

If it is better to travel than to arrive it is because traveling is a constant arriving, while arrival that precludes further traveling is most easily attained by going to sleep or dying.

Let us admit the case of the conservative: if we once start thinking no one can guarantee where we shall come out, except that many objects, ends and institutions are doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparantly stable world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place.

John Dewey

Henry Steele Commager, in **The American Mind** (his "interpretation of American thought and character since the 1880's"), says:

> More fully than any other philosopher of modern times, Dewey put philosophy to the service of society. More, he formed a whole network of alliances — with science, with politics ,with education, with aesthetics, all directed toward advancing the happiness of mankind. . .
>
> So faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed that he became the guide, the mentor, and the conscience of the American people: it is scarcely an exaggera-

> tion to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken. Pioneer in educational reform, organizer of political parties, counselor to statesmen, champion of labor, of woman's rights, of peace, of civil liberties . . . he was the spearhead of a dozen movements, the leader of a score of crusades, the advocate of a hundred reforms. He illustrated in his own career how effective philosophy could be in that reconstruction of society which was his preoccupation and its responsibility (1).

Alfred North Whitehead, one of the greatest of modern philosophers, calls John Dewey "the chief intellectual force providing (the North American) environment with coherent purpose." Ernest C. Moore, Director of the University of California in Los Angeles, said twenty years ago:

> We think of Professor Dewey as the most profound and understanding thinker on education that the world has yet known . . . Rousseau called Plato's **Republic** the greatest book on education ever written. It was that until John Dewey wrote his **Democracy and Education** (2).

Dewey's books have been translated into at least the following languages: French, German, Russian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Czech, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Turkish, Chinese and Japanese. It is safe to say that almost every country in the civilized world has been influenced in its educational system and in its social and political thinking by the thought and character of John Dewey. As the British Ambassador to the United States said several years ago: "Wherever British children today are active, purposeful, and happy in school there is little doubt that they owe something to the active, purposeful, happy, and long life of a great American philosopher (John Dewey)" (3).

All of the above, however, is not the most important point with regard to the philosophy of John Dewey. Great as was and is his influence for the creative reconstruction of man's community and communication — great as all this is, it is as nothing compared with what could be accomplished if we today were to take his intellectual achievements and translate them into effective action. The great contribution

of Dewey is that he has given us not just another philosophy, not just another temporarily satisfactory answer to contemporary and soon obsolete questions and problems — rather, he has given us an outline of essential attitudes, loyalties, and intellectual and emotional dispositions which can continuously help us in the future to reconstruct our own philosophies, arrive at more intelligent questions to be asked and more adequate answers to be found and cooperatively to arrive at a richer and more substantial future for all men.

Education in the modern world

What was education conceived to be before Dewey? It was several things: it was the way each adult generation took advantage of helpless children and imposed on them its ideas, values, and institutions so blatantly and self-righteously that the young, for the most part, were unable to think for themselves but accepted uncritically and unquestioningly whatever they were told; it was an attempt of a higher economic and social class to provide a narrow trade education for a lower class designed to kept it a productive, obedient and uncritical defender of the status quo; it was the attempt of the upper classes to give their own children a knowledge of the past and of the classics divorced, for the most part, from paltry considerations of the problems of men living together in this world.

Custom versus curiosity

What did Dewey say about all this? Referring to the first conception of education as outlined above, Dewey stated:

> The inert, stupid quality of current customs perverts learning into a willingness to follow where others point the way, into conformity, constriction, surrender of scepticism and experiment. When we think of the docility of the young we first think of the stocks of information adults wish to

impose and the ways of acting they want to reproduce. Then we think of the insolent coercions, the insinuating briberies, the pedagogic solemnities by which the freshness of youth can be faded and its vivid curiosities dulled. Education becomes the art of taking advantage of the helplessness of the young; the forming of habits becomes a guarantee for the maintenance of hedges of custom (4).

Always devoted to democracy, to progress, and to the role of intelligence in the modern world, Dewey outlined the distinction between this conservative education devoted to the upholding of the status quo and the type of education demanded of a democratic, progressive society.

> Progressive communities . . . endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society (will) be an improvement on their own (5).

Trade versus vocation

Dewey was always critical of the type of thinking in a democratic society that could defend educating a lower economic class for a trade and a higher class for "culture." He insisted that:

> Any scheme for vocational education which takes its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and to perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses, and thus to become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination. Those who are in a position to make their wishes good, will demand a liberal, a cultural occupation, and one which fits for directive power the youth in whom they are directly interested. To split the system, and give to others, less fortunately situated, an education conceived mainly as specific trade preparation, is to treat the schools as an agency for transferring the older division of labor and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class, into a society nominally democratic (6).

Whatever rationalizations may be used to defend this kind of education it is class education — the very antithesis of democratic education. Now Dewey does not mean that vocational education is undemocratic — he has always stressed the importance of the vocational aspect of education. But

there is a vast difference between educating a boy in a trade and giving him a vocational education in all its aspects and implications. This reconstruction of the meaning of vocation is outlined by Dewey as follows:

> An education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative in dealing with material and agencies of production; and study of economics, civics, and politics, to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement. Above all, it would train power of readaptation to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them. This ideal has to contend not only with the inertia of existing educational traditions, but also with the opposition of those who are entrenched in command of the industrial machinery, and who realize that such an educational system if made general would threaten their ability to use others for their own ends.
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> But this very fact is the presage of a more equitable and enlightened social order, for it gives evidence of the dependence of social reorganization upon educational reconstruction. It is accordingly an encouragement to those believing in a better order to undertake the promotion of a vocational education which does not subject youth to the demands and standards of the present system, but which utilizes its scientific and social factors to develop a courageous intelligence, and to make intelligence practical and executive (7).

Vocational education then can be enlightening and can be used to extend democratic ideas rather than to perpetuate a class-structured society.

Past, present and future

With reference to the third viewpoint, that which emphasizes culture and the classics for a privileged few, Dewey stated:

> The mistake of making the records and remains of the past the main material of education is that it cuts the vital connection of present and past, and tends to make the past a rival of the present and the present a more or less futile imitation of the past. Under such circumstances, culture be-

> comes an ornament and solace; a refuge and an asylum. Men escape from the crudities of the present to live in its imagined refinements, intead of using what the past offers as an agency for ripening these crudities (8).

Worship of the past for the sake of the past is nonsense. And worship of the past as the sole, authoritative resource for solving the problems of men today is futile and dangerous. The most effective and intelligent use of the past is not made by those who worship it but by those who use it as a significant resource for the imaginative reconstruction of the present. In Dewey's words:

> The present . . . generates the problems which lead us to search the past for suggestion, and which supplies meaning to what we find when we search . . . The moving present includes the past on condition that it uses the past to direct its own movement. The past is a great resource for the imagination; it adds a new dimension to life, but on condition that it be seen as the past of the present, and not as another and disconnected world. The principle which makes little of the present act of living and operation of growing, the only thing always present, naturally looks to the past because the future goal which it sets up is remote and empty. But having turned its back upon the present, it has no way of returning to it laden with the spoils of the past. A mind that is adequately sensitive to the needs and occasions of the present actuality will have the liveliest of motives for interest in the background of the present, and will never have to hunt for a way back because it will never have lost connection (9).

Change and the eternal

It is interesting to note that Dewey was born in 1859, the year that Darwin's **Origin of the Species** was published. Organic evolution played a striking role in the thought of Dewey. What is the basic concept underlying evolution? Obviously it is change. Change is the fundamental characteristic of nature and of life. For centuries man was content to believe, against all evidence, that the important things in life were unchanging and unchangeable. In fact, the philosophers defined "being" as that which exists without change. Whatever seemed to change either did not really change or

did not actually exist. Plato believed that ideas existed prior to thought — he felt that man's chief concern was to approach through the intellect these pre-existent, eternal and unchanging ideas. Aristotle, in spite of his "scientific" emphasis, saw the universe as a completely stable and static affair — he was concerned to understand what existed and therefore, from his point of view, what had always existed and would always continue to exist without change. St. Augustine took the ideas of Plato and put them into the mind of God and considered them again to be eternal and unchanging.

Now, what did this mean to educational theory and practice? It meant that educators who held to this static view insisted that the ideas which they held were not only true but were eternal and unchangeable. This came to mean that education was a passive affair — the child sat, listened, memorized and recited as the eternal wisdom of the teacher was poured into the receptive ears of the student.

And what did Dewey's interpretation of evolution mean for education? It meant that the child must be allowed freedom to search for truth. If man develops intelligence by learning how to function in his environment — if the purpose of that functioning is to find better ways of achieving desired and desirable ends — then, in the school the child must learn how to cope with his material and social environment, how to set up adequate ends, how to approach these ends efficiently and intelligently. In other words, the passive listening school has to become an activity school. The school must provide an environment which is conducive to that kind of purposeful activity which is functioning intelligence.

Purposeful activity and education

We in education are all well aware of the work which Dewey did in freeing the child, allowing him freedom to function, to act, to make, to do, and above all — to think. Many of us now take for granted the fact that "We learn by doing". But this was not the case at the end of the nineteenth century. Dewey described, in **The School and Society,** written in 1899, the attempt which he unsuccessfully made to purchase chairs or desks for school children which were designed for "doing". He said:

> Some few years ago I was looking about the school supply stores in the city, trying to find desks and chairs which seemed thoroughly suitable from all points of view — artistic, hygienic, and educational — to the needs of the children. We had a great deal of difficulty in finding what we needed, and finally one dealer, more intelligent than the rest, made this remark: "I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening." That tells the story of the traditional education (10).

Many educators jumped at the chance to exemplify Dewey's well-known emphasis on activity and for many years activity schools have been prominent throughout the United States. However, many exaggerated this attitude and did not realize that **activity in and of itself, without purpose, is not education.** Dewey can hardly be blamed for their misguided misinterpretation. As early as 1903 he stated: "Freedom of action without freed capacity of thought behind it is only chaos" (11). And in 1937 he was still insisting: "Unless freedom of individual action has intelligence and informed conviction back of it, its manifestation is almost sure to result in confusion and disorder" (12).

Morality and experience

The ill effects on education of the continuation of the older and obsolete view regarding eternal values, truths and

ideas were supplemented by its detrimental effects on morality and religion. With regard to static views on morality lity and religion. With regard to static views on morality Dewey stated:

> As habits set in grooves dominate activity and swerve it from conditions instead of increasing its adaptability, so principles treated as fixed rules instead of as helpful methods take men away from experience. The more complicated the situation, and the less we really know about it, the more insistent is the orthodox type of moral theory upon the prior existence of some fixed and universal principle or law which is to be directly applied and followed. Ready-made rules available at a moment's notice for settling any kind of moral difficulty and resolving every species of moral doubt have been the chief object of the ambition of moralists. In the much less complicated and less changing matters of bodily health such pretensions are known as quackery. But in morals a hankering for certainty, born of timidity and nourished by love of authoritarian prestige, has led to the idea that absence of immutably fixed and universally applicable ready-made principles is equivalent to moral chaos.
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> In fact, situations into which change and the unexpected enter are a challenge to intelligence to create new principles. Morals must be a growing science if it is to be a science at all, not merely because all truth has not yet been appropriated by the mind of man, but because life is a moving affair in which old moral truth ceases to apply (13).

Morality, like education, must change and grow with changing conditions. New social situations require that we re-examine our inherited moral ideas — we must see how they function under novel conditions. This does not mean that we must throw away all previous rules of conduct. "The choice is not between throwing away rules previously developed and sticking obstinately by them. The intelligent alternative is to revise, adapt, expand and alter them. The problem is one of continuous, vital readaptation" (14).

We must continuously reconstruct our morals basing our ethical ideas on the facts of human nature as we continuously discover them. Ethics, in this way, would be linked with the biological studies as well as with the study of the social sciences. This, obviously, would not be a panacea — there is no simple, easy way to discover the

meaning of the good life. However, even if such a morals would not prevent us from making mistakes it would, at least, provide us with the means of profiting and learning from our errors. As Dewey summarized his position:

> The intelligent acknowledgment of the continuity of nature, man and society will alone secure a growth of morals which will be serious without being fanatical, aspiring without sentimentality, adapted to reality without conventionality, sensible without taking the form of calculation of profits, idealistic without being romantic (15).

Religion and experience

In religion men have often failed to accomplish what could and should have been accomplished because they felt that problems such as poverty, disease, overpopulation and war were manifestations of an eternal and unchanging divine order of things beyond human understanding. They neglected to do anything to improve conditions because they believed that a cure was impossible or they imagined that only divine intervention could remedy such terrible troubles. Dewey described this attitude when he said:

> Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing (16).

And again: "Interest in the supernatural . . . reinforces other vested interests to prolong the social reign of accident" (17).

Accepting the necessity of recognizing change in the modern world, Dewey has defined the religious attitude by saying that:

> Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality (18).

And bringing religion up-to-date and consistent with modern knowledge and conditions we can say, in Dewey's words:

> Faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed co-operative human endeavor is more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation (19).

Scientific method

This brings us to another of Dewey's most important allegiances — devotion to scientific method. For many years he has insisted that we will progress in proportion as we use scientific method to solve our problems in areas where it is not yet used. As he said:

> Since scientific methods simply exhibit free intelligence operating in the best manner available at a given time, the cultural waste, confusion, and distortion that result from the failure to use these methods, in all fields in connection with all problems, is incalculable (20).

Science, however, is not an absolute. Dewey does not make the mistake of so many others in setting up science as God, eternal and infallible. His criticism of the scientific positivists is emphatic and vigorous. Those who believe that the present findings of science are the answer to all questions are those who, for the most part, are ignorant of the meaning of science. As Dewey pointed out:

> Literary persons have been chiefly the ones in this country who have fallen for Marxist theory, since they are the ones who, having the least amount of scientific attitude, swallow most readily the notion that "science" is a new kind of infallibility (21).

Science, to Dewey, is primarily a method — a method of dealing with the affairs and problems of men — and it is the best method yet devised by man for this purpose. Devotion to science does not mean unquestioned devotion to those facts which today have been most clearly demonstrated

by scientific method: rather, it is allegiance to the method of intelligence in dealing with the problems of men. As Dewey defined it:

> Science signifies, I take it, the existence of systematic methods of inquiry, which when they are brought to bear on a range of facts, enable us to understand them better and to control them more intelligently, less haphazardly and with less routine (22).

Or, as Dewey has phrased it in another context, "Science is experience becoming rational" (23). Unfortunately, however, science is too recent to have been absorbed into the intellectual and emotional dispositions of modern man — he uses science in his everyday practical affairs but he does not as yet realize that science can be used to imaginatively reconstruct his ends and purposes. The aims of man remain, to a great extent, what they were before the advent of scientific enlightenment.

Accepting this, what is the role of education with respect to science? According to Dewey:

> The problem of an educational use of science is then to create an intelligence pregnant with belief in the possibility of the direction of human affairs by itself (24).

In other words, through education in the meaning and function of scientific method we come to understand the conditions of human action and progress. In fact, science "is the sole instrumentality of conscious, as distinct from accidental, progress" (25).

Democracy and education

The third main basis of Dewey's philosophy of education is democracy. Democracy is a way of utilising the first two points discussed above for the purpose of advancing the Christian-Hebraic conception of the unique worth of the individual person. "The cause of democracy is the moral cause of the dignity and worth of the individual" (26). Demo-

cracy gains strength by viewing the world as a world of change — and it adds to the conception of the dynamic quality of experience by providing a faith, a faith that through the cooperation of men working intelligently together a better society can be made. Democracy gains strength when it utilises to the fullest possible extent the findings of science and the method of scientific inquiry in its quest for a better world for all men — scientific inquiry gains when democracy provides it with direction and purpose. The Christian-Hebraic conception of the worth of the individual gains when democracy and scientific method give it an opportunity as never before to manifest itself in the actual life of men living on this earth.

The problems involved in this outlook are admittedly many and difficult. As Dewey truly stated:

> Democracy is not an easy road to take and follow. On the contrary, it is, as far as its realization is concerned in the complex conditions of the contemporary world, a supremely difficult one. Upon the whole we are entitled to take courage from the fact that it has worked as well as it has done. But to this courage we must add, if our courage is to be intelligent rather than blind, the fact that the successful maintenance of democracy demands the utmost in use of the best available methods to procure a social knowledge that is reasonably commensurate with our technological abilities in physical affairs . . .
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> The cause is capable of inspiring loyalty in thought and deed. But there has to be joined to aspiration and effort the formation of free, wide-ranging, trained attitudes of observation and understanding such as incorporate within themselves, as a matter so habitual as to be unconscious, the vital principles of scientific method. In this achievement science, education, and the democratic cause meet as one. May we be equal to the occasion. For it is our human problem. If a solution is found it will be through the medium of human desire, human understanding, and human endeavor (27).

Faith in human intelligence

If we would succeed in developing the union of science, education and democracy we must remember that

> The keynote of democracy may be expressed . . . as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together; which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals . . .
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> The foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human intelligence and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience. It is not belief that these things are complete but that, if given a show, they will grow and be able to generate progressively the knowledge and wisdom needed to guide collective action (28).

It is appropriate that I end this brief discussion of Dewey's philosophy by quoting from **My Pedagogic Creed,** published in 1897. In this earliest of Dewey's educational writings he stated:

> I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform . . . The community's duty to education is, therefore, its paramount moral duty. By law and punishment, by social agitation and discussion, society can regulate and form itself in a more or less haphazard and chance way. But through education society can formulate its own purposes, can organize its own means and resources, and thus shape itself with definiteness and economy in the direction in which it wishes to move (29).

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