DEWEY, John (1859-1952)

John Dewey was an American philosopher, educational theorist, and one of the three major pragmatists, along with William James and Charles Saunders Peirce. After obtaining a doctorate at Johns Hopkins, he began his academic career at the University of Michigan, where he established a psychology laboratory that studied stimulus reflexes. Later, at the University of Chicago, he turned to the reform of primary and secondary education and founded programs that could better integrate immigrants into American culture. He defended democracy, envisioning it as a sense of community in which the individual interests of all could eventually be understood. Individualism necessitated the appeal to mutual dependence and institutions, which were tested and constantly changed over time for the greater good, were a kind of perpetual scientific experiment. Central to his thinking on education was the notion of experience. Knowledge, he held, was always obtained after reflection upon concrete experiences. In this model, called the “Dewey flux,” one generates abstractions (mental ideas) after having concrete experiences. These abstractions in turn then have to be rendered material—Dewey’s version of the “hermeneutic circle.” The mission of progressive education, for Dewey, was to get students to become conscious of this perpetual “flux” between concrete experiences and abstractions.

Bibliography: Boisvert, Raymond D. *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.

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