Review: An Attempt to Resolve the Progressive-Conservative Controversy

Reviewed Work(s): Experience and Education by John Dewey

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Educational Writings

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REVIEWS AND BOOK NOTES

AN ATTEMPT TO RESOLVE THE PROGRESSIVE-CONSERVATIVE CONTROVERSY.—Professor Dewey has long been looked on by both progressives and conservatives as the chief leader, if not the originator, of the progressive movement. Some observers have thought, however, that the more radical tenets and practices of progressive educators did not find warrant in his writings and were probably not approved by him. Until the present, Professor Dewey has not made a clear-cut statement to indicate where he would draw the line between the conservatives and the radicals. A late book[1] does much to clarify his position on the broader issues. It will doubtless have large influence in the direction of the moderate theory and practice.

Professor Dewey disclaims the attempt to find a merely middle-of-the-road policy or a compromise between conflicting theories. Like many who seek to think through educational problems to basic facts or principles, he is suspicious of the "either-or" way of stating and discussing these problems. He strives to penetrate beneath the opposed theories and to find a basis for a doctrine which will comprehend the truth of both and eliminate the error of each. To this effort all reasonable students of education should have been committed long ago.

As an introduction to the attempt to find a truer doctrine than that of either of the opposed factions, Dewey points out the chief features of the two extremes. On the reactionary side he finds the predominant features to be imposition from above, external discipline, learning from textbooks and teachers, the acquisition of isolated skills, preparation for the more or less remote future, and static aims and materials. Opposed to these on the progressive side are expression and cultivation of personality, free activity, learning through experience, acquisition of skills as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal, making the most of the opportunities of present life, and acquaintance with a changing world.

In putting these principles into practice, and even in stating them, many progressives appear to overlook some of the fundamental features of genuine education. Dewey criticizes such neglect clearly and emphatically. He presses home the need for continuity of experience and for the employment of organized subject matter of study. He ridicules the notions that the teacher is the one person in the school who should exercise no initiative and that the experience

[1] John Dewey, *Experience and Education*. The Kappa Delta Pi Lecture Series. New York: Macmillan Co., 1938. Pp. xii+116. $1.25.

and training of the teacher should play no part in the guidance of the pupils' learning. He rejects the idea that acquaintance with the past has little or no role to play in education. He points out that freedom does not mean the absence of control and direction. These words will be welcome to many educators who have been urging such principles for years. They raise the hope that the violent controversy over progressive education may become a thing of the past. Those who have previously turned a deaf ear to such doctrine may now perhaps accept it because of their reverence for Professor Dewey's authority.

Professor Dewey's aim is not merely to state an acceptable educational doctrine; it is, first and foremost, to establish a fundamental basis in theory or philosophy for such a doctrine. This aim he seeks to accomplish by appealing to the philosophy of experience. There must be an "organic connection between education and personal experience" (p. 12), and "education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual" (p. 113). True—and obvious! Does it, however, give a basis for discriminating between good and bad kinds of education? Everything that happens to a person when he is awake and aware of what is going on is an experience. As Dewey says, "It is a great mistake to suppose, even tacitly, that the traditional schoolroom was not a place where pupils had experiences" (p. 14). To be sure! But "experiences which were had, by pupils and teachers alike, were largely of a wrong kind" (p. 15). Quite possibly! At any rate, the fact that the pupil is experiencing is no criterion of the value of his experiences or of the educational setup which provides them for him.

How then does Professor Dewey get a basis for discriminating between good and bad forms of education? It depends, he says, on the *quality* of experience. To further define a desirable quality of experience, he says it must have continuity or growth, that it must be integrated or organized, and that it must take account of the future as well as of the present. Where does he get the basis for these criteria of good experience? Not, obviously, out of the concept of experience itself. The nature of experience as an idea or a concept does not contain within itself the basis for distinguishing between kinds of experiences and marking one as good and the other as bad.

Experience includes many experiences of many kinds. All these experiences, good and bad alike, make up the sum total of experience. The difference between desirable and undesirable forms of education lies, then, not in the fact that one is experience and the other is not experience, but in the fact that one is good and the other bad experience.

It is well that Professor Dewey makes this distinction. It deserves special emphasis. Some proponents of particular brands of education have sought to validate their doctrines by asserting that they are based on children's experience, as contrasted with other doctrines which, by implication, ignore children's experience. The assumption that one kind of education involves child experience and another does not has given a false and easy sanction to the one kind

and a spurious condemnation to the other. This assumption has made it seem unnecessary to examine the merits of the proposed practices specifically and in detail and has given them an aura of sanctity by applying to them the blanket term "experience."

Let it be understood once and for all that such argument is nothing but polemical legerdemain. All education of every kind is experience. We cannot discriminate between one kind and another by saying that one is experience and the other is not. We must discover and apply criteria which will distinguish between good experience and bad experience.

There are two broadly distinguished ways by which such criteria may be discovered. The first is to sit down and try to work the problem out by analysis and reflection, to try to find criteria which seem reasonable or consistent. The other is to observe the working of various practices in multitudes of actual situations in many schoolrooms and try to discover which works out the best in actual practice. The first is the philosophical or speculative method; the second, the pragmatic, empirical, or scientific method. Professor Dewey advocates the second method, but it appears that, when it comes to the actual setting-up of criteria, he uses the first.

The question will be raised: Can the appeal to speculative criteria be avoided, even in the empirical method? How are we to judge whether one practice works out better than another in actual schoolroom procedure, except by appealing to standards of good or bad working which have previously been assumed? Where do such standards come from? Here is where the final issue lies. The standards may be sought in the reflection of an individual in his armchair as he attempts to work out a speculative system; or they may be sought in the accumulated wisdom of mankind, expressed in multitudes of judgments made in the face of numberless actual situations of life. These judgments have to be formulated, classified, and generalized before they can become principles of action. Such formulation is a process of thought, but the thought is exercised on the actual material of experience and is not independent nor self-contained.

No thought, of course, is entirely self-contained. It always depends, remotely if not directly, on the thinker's observation and experience. It is, in some degree, empirical. The advancement of science consists in making the examination of experience more extensive, more systematic, and more exact so that the thinking grows more directly out of it and conforms more closely to it.

Professor Dewey has pointed out more clearly than any other philosopher the necessity of basing thought and theory on experience. The question is whether, when he comes to make his practical judgments on educational procedures, he goes explicitly to experience for the source of his conclusions. Experience and education, he says, must have growth and integration and must have reference to the future. These principles will give education the desirable quality. Whence are these principles derived? Do they not smack of the speculative character that Professor Dewey repudiates? Will they not be used as shibboleths much as has the more general category of experience itself? The

reviewer feels that they are largely speculative in origin and that they will be used largely as a priori and authoritarian principles. Professor Dewey has pointed the way to the empirical method, but he himself has only partly followed the way.

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GENTLEMEN RATHER THAN SCHOLARS OR WORKERS.—With his customary directness MacLean, in the opening paragraph of his Inglis Lecture,[1] states his purpose in making the address:

> I feel . . . . under the compulsion and stimulus of high duty. That duty is to report to you, as Dewey, Koos, Counts, and others have each year reported to you, on the present state of the educational world in the United States. It is my intention to show you, if I can, the conflicts at present raging, somewhat of their origins, and finally the newly-arrived-at formulae which educators are just beginning experimentally to apply and which offer much hope for solution instead of disaster [p. 2].

The conflicts which MacLean emphasizes relate to the purposes of education. He asserts that we have not yet determined "what kind of an end product or what kinds of end products we want to issue from our schools" (p. 3).

Typically, MacLean asserts, educators talk and act as though the *scholar* is the one end product that we want from our schools. The author calls for the training of more and better scholars (democracy needs them), but, he points out, only a few can attain real scholarship. Furthermore, he raises a question whether a world composed entirely of scholars would be desirable.

Students, motivated by their money-conscious elders, often demand an education which has value only in terms of dollars and cents; they wish to become "successful" *workers*. MacLean recognizes the value of vocational and professional training, but he quarrels "with overstressing such training to the exclusion of all other life-values [and cocks] a skeptical and dour Scot's eye at anyone who expresses the belief that anywhere, in any school, college, or university a perfect or nearly perfect job is being done in this field of education" (p. 36).

The final point of view on the aims of education which MacLean considers is that schools should train *gentlemen*. MacLean identifies the term "gentlemen" with "culture" and points out his disagreement with those who consider culture to be a "facile acquaintance with the great classics of literature and history" (p. 43). He suggests the fallacy of the concept which reduces culture to the basis of superficial "personality-building or etiquette." A cultured man, as MacLean conceives him, is "one who finds himself at home and at ease in all the varieties of situations with which life presents him, and with all people with whom, day by day, he rubs elbows in lesser or greater intimacy" (p. 46). *Scholars* can afford but little of the training leading to such culture, but *workers* need much of it.

[1] Malcolm S. MacLean, *Scholars, Workers, and Gentlemen*. The Inglis Lecture, 1938. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1938. Pp. 86. $1.00.