

# John Dewey and the Mutual Influence of Democracy and Education

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**Abstract:** For Dewey education is the growth of mental powers, where “growth” has no fixed content but involves the increasing harmonization of individuals with society. That harmonization must respect the uniqueness of each person and his capacity for intelligence. Education aims to develop a model democratic society, which Dewey sees as similar to an ideal community of scientific inquirers. That comparison is highly questionable, however. Dewey’s curricular emphases include science, geography, history, literature, and fine arts, the last two of which promote a greater appreciation for all of human life—provided society is not too separated into classes. Related to social division is what he considers the false problems of epistemology, with its separation between mind and world. But Dewey’s failure to think more rigorously about the relation of philosophy to science makes his philosophy a poor bulwark against postmodernism.

John Dewey (1859–1952) was a democrat and an educator through all of his public activities: high-school teacher, professor of philosophy, contributor to political journals, lecturer in Japan and China, and chair of the Trotsky Commission in Mexico City. His concerns with democracy and education can be seen throughout the thirty-seven volumes of his collected works.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere are those concerns more evident than in his most influential book, *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916. Other writings provide a fuller justification of the democratic ideal and more thorough treatment of the basic problems of democratic politics; still other writings provide more detailed prescriptions for the activities of schools. *Democracy and Education* attempts to answer the basic, general questions of what democracy means

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<sup>1</sup>References to Dewey’s writings are to the critical (print) edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–1991), and published in three series as *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW), and *The Later Works* (LW). These designations are followed by volume and page number. “LW 1.14,” for example, refers to *The Later Works*, vol. 1, p. 14.

for education and vice versa. Its purpose is to “state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply these ideas to the problems of the enterprise of education” (3).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it opens avenues into other aspects of his thought.

Dewey divides the book into four parts (331–33). The first part (chapters 1–5) considers education in general as a social need, then in particular as a democratic need, along with the general features of education. The second part (chapters 6–14) treats democratic aims in education and articulates principles of method and subject matter. Part three (chapters 15–23) begins by considering aspects of the curriculum but is mainly devoted to practical and philosophical impediments to the democratic ideal. Interestingly, perhaps oddly, the book concludes (chapters 24–26) with reflections on the nature of philosophy.

## Part 1: Education and Growth

Education, Dewey writes, is a means toward the “social continuity of life” (5). It is a part of every social group because the preservation of the group is not merely a physical matter; knowledge, customs, and ways of life must also be maintained. But more than preservation is at stake, because the fact that humans are capable of indefinite “growth”—a key word in Dewey’s vocabulary, as we will see—increases the importance of education over time: “With the growth of civilization, the gap between the original capacities of the immature and the standards and customs of the elders increases” (6).

Schools are one means of conducting education, which should simplify and purify the student’s environment. Purification aims to create not a problem-free situation, but one in which the “trivial,” “dead,” and “perverse” aspects of the environment are eliminated from children’s activities (24). Schools, however, are “a relatively superficial means” of education (7). Education is present wherever there is communication, the goals of which are the formation and maintenance of the shared beliefs and practices that make community possible. All institutions have a role to play, and all are to be judged according to their “effect in enlarging and improving experience” (9). What Dewey means by “enlarged and improved experience” is not immediately clear, but the distinction surely depends on a separation of education from mere training in a skill. Education involves acquiring the means to take the initiative in shaping the common activities of society, which are crucial in the process of forming meanings (20).

Such acquisition requires significant direction of the activities of the student by the teacher (pace the caricature of Dewey’s educational thought as laissez-faire). His general advice is that control be exercised in those cases that “are so

<sup>2</sup>Parenthetical references are to the page numbers of MW 9, which contains *Democracy and Education*.

instinctive or impulsive that the one performing them has no means of foreseeing their outcome" (32). Wherever direction is exercised, it must be with regard to the harmonization of individual and society. Insofar as learning is not directed toward social ends, "ordinary vital experience fails to gain in meaning" (12). But education also provides distance from immediate social demands, which will always determine mental activity unless the individual can critically examine those demands (21).

To understand Dewey's discussion of education as direction and growth of mental powers in chapters 3 and 4, we must understand something of his psychological theory. He writes that "character and mind are attitudes of participative response in social affairs" (326). Elsewhere he elaborates that "the natural unaided mind means precisely the habits of belief, thought and desire which have been accidentally generated and confirmed by social institutions or customs."<sup>3</sup> Not only does this passage suggest Dewey's belief that there is very little we can say about human nature apart from social conditions;<sup>4</sup> it also identifies mind itself with a set of habits, which are social functions. Mind is "the power to understand things in terms of the use made of them," and meaning itself comes from the social use made of things, not from the simple association of sensory images (38).

Of course the meanings of things are limited by the things in human experience. Dewey is convinced that people in modern times have a decisive advantage over those of ancient times: our superior control of natural forces, through the method of modern science, provides superior stimuli. "A body of knowledge is transmitted, the legitimacy of which is guaranteed by the fact that the physical equipment in which it is incarnated leads to results that square with the other facts of nature" (42). It is the application of science in machines, and technology in general, that assures Dewey that an enhanced way of life is available to us that was not possible for the ancient Greeks.

But Dewey does not assume the inevitability of progress with the rise of modern science and technology. Regress is possible as well as progress, and human beings have a responsibility for the promotion of the latter, or growth. Whence do we take our bearings? Dewey insists that nature does not provide a fixed standard; he objects to the view whereby the "environment is thought of as something fixed, providing in its fixity the end and standard of changes taking place in the organism; adjustment is just fitting ourselves to this fixity of external conditions" (51). He does not deny that education requires a degree of adjustment or adaptation to the environment. But, for reasons somewhat similar to Friedrich Nietzsche's, he refuses to characterize human behavior in terms of the evolutionary model of adaptation: "Adaptation, in fine, is quite as much adaptation of the environment

<sup>3</sup>*Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in MW 14.225.

<sup>4</sup>See "Does Human Nature Change?" (1938), in LW 13.286–87.

to our own activities as of our activities *to the environment*" (52).<sup>5</sup> Adaptation viewed merely in terms of conformity to the environment does not leave enough room for human creativity.

Growth has been one of Dewey's most misunderstood terms because it has no absolute content for him. "Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim in living." Growth itself is "the only moral 'end.'"<sup>6</sup> This implies that "the educational process has no end beyond itself" (54). Given the supposed failure of all absolutist philosophies to justify their ends, Dewey sees no alternative to that conclusion. Education is not simply preparation for a completed state to be arrived at in the future. Moreover, the result of a view of education as preparation is that students will be lethargic, will have no urgency in their daily lives. Nor is education an unfolding from within of the student's potentiality toward a certain end. That is the teaching of Georg W. F. Hegel; and despite Dewey's great and acknowledged debt to Hegel throughout his philosophical career, by 1916 he is long past the point of relying on anything like a Hegelian *Geist* as a philosophical foundation. Growth must be the end of education, Dewey believes, because modern science has destroyed the ancient view of the universe as purposive and tending toward rest and finality.<sup>7</sup>

Does Dewey's opposition to those views of education result in a clear notion of what he means by education and living as growth? He is well aware of the standard objection: it is possible to grow in morally reprehensible ways as well as upright ones.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he does give criteria. Growth requires liberty, both in the negative sense of absence of restraint and in the positive sense of ability to do.<sup>9</sup> It also means that "[a]n environment in which some are limited will always in reaction create conditions that prevent the full development even of those who fancy they enjoy complete freedom for unhindered growth."<sup>10</sup>

James H. Nichols Jr. has suggested that Dewey's philosophy does not clearly distinguish growth from its opposite: when Dewey says that growth is what enables more growth to occur, he appears to rely ultimately upon the Hobbesian test of survival.<sup>11</sup> Does Dewey have a good answer to Nichols's objection? In a passage from *Experience and Education*, Dewey asks whether a person can truly "grow" as a criminal: "Does this form of

<sup>5</sup>See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, essay 2, sec. 12.

<sup>6</sup>*Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), in MW 12.181.

<sup>7</sup>See Dewey's contribution to *Encyclopaedia and Dictionary of Education* (1921), in MW 13.404–5.

<sup>8</sup>*Experience and Education* (1938), in LW 13.19–20.

<sup>9</sup>*The Public and Its Problems* (1927), in LW 2.329.

<sup>10</sup>*The Need for a Philosophy of Education* (1934), in LW 9.203.

<sup>11</sup>James H. Nichols Jr., "Pragmatism and the U.S. Constitution," in *Confronting the Constitution*, ed. Allan Bloom (Washington: AEI Press, 1990), 382. I have profited much from Nichols's essay.

growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions? What is the effect of growth in a special direction upon the attitudes and habits which alone open up avenues for development in other lines? I shall leave you to answer these questions, saying simply that when and *only* when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing.”<sup>12</sup> Dewey’s leaving those questions to the reader might be interpreted as an admission of weakness in his argument. Alternatively, he has already stated that it is not his purpose in that book to discuss in detail the philosophical justification of democratic institutions; so perhaps we should not expect an answer to the question, Why be a law-abiding democrat instead of a burglar or a corrupt politician (those are Dewey’s examples)?

Again alternatively, the passage quoted above might be interpreted as suggesting fairly clear answers to the questions. Dewey seems to imply that a burglar or a corrupt politician is shut off from further stimuli, which include other people, for continuing growth. Perhaps he leaves us to draw the seemingly incontrovertible conclusions that we cannot all survive together as burglars or corrupt politicians, and that no one can survive alone.

## Part 2: The Democratic Conception

As we begin to look at the second part of *Democracy and Education*, we note that Dewey might make two other replies to Nichols’s charge that growth is no more than the means to survival. First, in chapter 7, “The Democratic Conception in Education,” he advances the following standards for gauging the worth of a form of association: “How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?” (89). Growth, then, is the increasing harmonization of individuals within society. And this harmonization is more than is needed for mere survival; so growth is not reducible to survival.

Second, Dewey devotes a good deal of thought to moral growth. What constitutes moral growth in an individual, he and James H. Tufts argue elsewhere, is a movement from the stage of (1) acting according to habit to (2) paying attention to the meaning of that habit to (3) acting according to a higher, or more thoughtful, habit. This movement uses reason as “an element in determining what shall be sought.”<sup>13</sup> Paying attention means using one’s reason; thus reason is not fundamentally for the sake of survival. Instead reason leads to a higher goal, growth, where the higher goal can be distinguished from a lower according to the degree of harmonization.

<sup>12</sup> *Experience and Education*, in LW 13.19–20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ethics* (with James H. Tufts) (1908), in MW 5.17.

Thus Dewey's ability to avoid the problem raised by Nichols depends on his thesis that more social harmonization is better than less. Dewey sees nothing in human nature – neither reason, nor passion, nor anything else – the development of which would render that goal either impossible or undesirable.

Dewey devotes several pages of chapter 7 to Plato's educational teaching, particularly in the *Republic*. He praises Plato for recognizing the educational significance of social institutions and the role of education in developing and harmonizing citizens' capacities. But Plato "never got any conception of the indefinite plurality of activities which may characterize an individual and a social group, and consequently limited his view to a limited number of *classes* of capacities and of social arrangements" (94). In addition, he lacked "the perception of the uniqueness of every individual, his incommensurability with others," and thus did not recognize that "a society might change and yet be stable" (96). This perception leads Dewey to call democracy a moral ideal, "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (93). Plato's system of classes would hurt both the superior and the inferior classes (90). This article is not the place to enter into an extensive critique of Dewey's exegesis of Plato; it will have to suffice to point out Socrates' profession of doubt concerning his proposals.<sup>14</sup>

Dewey rejects both natural development and social efficiency as educational goals. As for the former, which sees growth as "natural" development in the sense of spontaneous or unhindered, he objects to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*. Dewey says that children lack the already determined futures of seeds, and that all growth requires external help. "A stunted oak, or a stalk of maize with few ears of scattered grains, exhibits natural development as truly as the noblest tree or the prize-winning ear of maize."<sup>15</sup> To appeal to nature as the goal is to neglect that the "natural, or native, powers furnish the initiating and limiting forces in all education; they do not furnish its ends or aims" (121).

The conception of social efficiency as the aim of education can take the form of industrial competency, in which case it tends to favor the status quo; or it can take the form of good citizenship, which has the advantage of greater definiteness but may be interpreted too narrowly. True social efficiency, Dewey says, requires the having and using of leisure, art, and recreation (127).

The second part of the book also stresses the commonality that Dewey sees between a model democratic society and an ideal community of scientific inquirers—a point worth examining in some detail. He must first show the inadequacy of epistemological rationalism (the view that knowledge begins with an act of pure mind or reason) as opposed to pragmatic empiricism (to be explained below). Thus he objects to our "making an entity out of the abstract noun 'consciousness'" (110). Mental states do not constitute a

<sup>14</sup>Plato *Republic* 450c–451a.

<sup>15</sup>*Need for a Philosophy of Education*, in LW 9.196.

purely private realm but are instead bound up with physical objects (132, 147). Such mind-body dualism is “the root of the dualism of method and subject matter” in education (173).

To that rationalism Dewey opposes a notion of reason as a “reflective” process consisting of several steps, which constitute the scientific method: (a) “perplexity,” (b) “a conjectural anticipation,” (c) “a careful survey” of all considerations, (d) “elaboration of the tentative hypothesis to make it more precise and more consistent,” and (e) acting upon the hypothesis in order to test it (157). These steps are guidelines, not rigid rules to be followed in every scientific inquiry. The method of one inquirer will vary from that of another “as his original instinctive capacities vary, as his past experiences and his preferences vary” (180). Dewey characterizes a liberal intelligence as “playing freely upon the subjugation of the world for human ends” but not manipulating others for selfish aims (143). Thus science for Dewey means thinking and acting with purpose—not taking a chance on one’s fortune, but instead taking responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions (110, 153).

Dewey sees the scientific method as logically connected to democratic method. “It is of the nature of science not so much to tolerate as to welcome diversity of opinion, while it insists that inquiry brings the evidence of observed facts to bear to effect a consensus of conclusions. . . . [F]reedom of inquiry, toleration of diverse views, freedom of communication, the distribution of what is found out to every individual as the ultimate intellectual consumer, are involved in the democratic as in the scientific method.”<sup>16</sup> But how solid is this kinship? On the one hand, comparison to science may lift up democratic practice by giving it a goal to strive for—the truth or reasonable desire—instead of the desire of the moment. On the other hand, science does not always operate through democratic means; in fact some of the greatest scientific achievements have come when at least one of the five steps mentioned by Dewey has been violated, or when diverse views have not been fully tolerated, or when one person has worked alone (Isaac Newton was reluctant to communicate his work). Moreover, as Dewey is well aware, science does not always operate for democratic ends.<sup>17</sup>

### Part 3: The Curriculum

The third part of *Democracy and Education* begins by considering aspects of the curriculum. Dewey takes up at greater length the theme of play and work, inside and outside school, briefly mentioned in the analysis of science. He rejects the typical, economic distinction between play and work for a more nuanced distinction: like play, work “signifies purposeful activity and

<sup>16</sup>Freedom and Culture (1939), in LW 13.135.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 156.

differs *not* in that activity is subordinated to an external result, but in the fact that a longer course of activity is occasioned by the idea of a result. The demand for continuous attention is greater, and more intelligence must be shown in selecting and shaping means" (212). In neither play nor work should activity be a mere means to a desired end, but in both play and work activity is undertaken for the sake of an end. The difference is that with work more attention is paid to the results attained than with play. Dewey claims that work done with a playful spirit should be considered "art" (214).

When we come to the specifics of the curriculum, Dewey's emphases are more controversial. History and geography are "the information studies *par excellence* of the schools" because they "enrich and liberate the more direct and personal contacts of life by furnishing their context, their background and outlook" (218). Dewey sees a deeper relation between those two subjects—at least between geography and one aspect of history—than is commonly recognized. Geography has a primary focus on the study of nature; and economic history is "more human, more democratic, and hence more liberalizing" than political history because it deals with the human conquest of nature and not mainly with princes or military commanders (223–24). Thus Dewey stresses history and geography as opposed to mathematics, literature, or art as it is usually construed, because those two subjects uniquely prepare the way for education in scientific method for social purposes. A frequent criticism of Dewey has been that he advocates teaching basic literacy and mathematics in the context of practical activities, forgetting the necessary role of memorization.<sup>18</sup> That has also been a criticism of progressive education; its child-centered excesses<sup>19</sup> with which Dewey has often been unfairly associated.

Humanistic studies that do not provide a study of nature "tend to shrink to 'the classics,' to languages no longer spoken." Knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman civilization is extremely valuable, Dewey says; but to consider such knowledge the model of human wisdom "tends to cultivate a narrow snobbery: that of a learned class whose insignia are the accidents of exclusive opportunity." Education in natural science, which by contrast is open to all people, is thus more humanistic. Dewey does not here justify his claim that the natural sciences, as opposed to the study of Greek and Roman civilization, are "accessible in education to the masses." Nor does he explore the implications for democracy of his conclusion that not all citizens are capable of studying the Greeks and Romans, who "made such important contributions to our civilization" (238).

<sup>18</sup>See *Schools of To-Morrow* (1915), chaps 4 and 5, in MW 8.

<sup>19</sup>See *Experience and Education*, in LW 13, for Dewey's fullest attempt to separate himself from the position that education should leave children to act on their own desires.

The significance of science is that it “marks the emancipation of mind from devotion to customary purposes and makes possible the systematic pursuit of new ends” (231). The advance of science has taught us not to consider the ills of human existence as inevitable. The particular problem of education in science, as Dewey sees it, is to convey the thought that humans can direct their own activities without help from God or natural law. As we have seen, this problem is not one of human nature; it is one of changing habitual ways of thinking (232). Experimental science “means that reason operates within experience, not beyond it, to give it an intelligent or reasonable quality” (233). What science alone can communicate is the meaning of objects, as opposed to the meaning of what we might call entire “experiences” (which might be communicated most effectively by the literary arts); other people can then apply the meanings of objects to their own situations. Thus science is “the sole instrumentality of conscious, as distinct from accidental, progress” (236).

In the next chapter, devoted to “educational values,” Dewey links the previous discussion of aim and interest to the matter of the curriculum (240). Literature and the fine arts receive treatment here. Those subjects can provide training in method or skill of various sorts, and they can be socially useful. Their primary function, however, is to promote “an intensified, enhanced appreciation” of the things in human life (246). In this regard, Dewey says, they are the model for the other subjects of the curriculum, each of which should also be intrinsically valuable at some point in the educational process. What keeps that from being the case is the inclination to compartmentalize different subjects; the cause of that inclination is “the isolation of social groups and classes” from one another (258).

Thus for the remainder of the third part of the book Dewey is concerned to combat impediments, theoretical and practical, to his conception of democratic education. He begins with the isolation of classes, which separates those who labor from those who enjoy the fruits of labor, thereby preventing work from being art. He traces the isolation of classes back to ancient Greece, alleging that Plato’s and Aristotle’s works reflect and endorse this unfortunate social development. Consequent to that social development was the separation of intellectual studies from practical studies, of social studies from physical studies, of humanism from naturalism, and of the individual from the world. Dewey appears to find the root cause—at least the intellectual cause—of all of these false dichotomies in the advent of the field of epistemology: “The identification of mind with the self, and the setting up of the self as something independent and self-sufficient, created such a gulf between the knowing mind and the world that it became a question how knowledge was possible at all” (302). If reformers such as Galileo and Descartes had seen more clearly, they “would have perceived that such disconnection, such rupture of continuity, denied in advance the possibility of success in their endeavors” (304).

The central goal of Dewey’s metaphysics is to advance recognition of the existential “continuity” between mind and world—“organism” and

"environment," as he says.<sup>20</sup> In a later work, *Experience and Nature*, he attempts to use scientific method to disprove metaphysical dualisms, such as between mind and body. The key to Dewey's effort is the continuity, or continuum, that he claims may be found within "experience" itself: experience "recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality."<sup>21</sup> If we are given a mind internal to a person and an external world (including the body connected to that mind) separate from it, how can the mind hook up with the world to find out about it? If, however, "mind" and "world" are not conceived of as existentially separate, but instead as analytical terms of distinction, functional discriminations from an original totality, then the problem dissolves. Knowledge is something that occurs, and we may usefully describe it as an activity in terms such as "mind" and "world," as long as we do not distort their significance.

Many readers have found *Experience and Nature* to be one of the most puzzling of Dewey's books. How can Dewey use empirical method to reach metaphysical conclusions? First it helps to understand that by "metaphysics" Dewey does not refer to anything existing in a realm beyond nature; the goal of metaphysics is "detection and description of the generic traits of existence," and he does not grant the existence of anything supernatural.<sup>22</sup>

Then we may recur to *Democracy and Education*, where he contrasts his theory of knowing to other theories by averring that his assumes the notion of continuity (343). Other theories, he claims, tend to dichotomize empirical versus rational knowing, learning as storehouse of material versus learning as doing, passivity versus activity, emotions versus intellect, theory versus practice. He then presents two main arguments for continuity—in this context, of mind and body. First, progress in physiology and psychology has demonstrated the connections among the mind, the nervous system, and the body. The "nervous system is only a specialized mechanism for keeping all bodily activities working together. . . . While each motor response [to a stimulus] is adjusted to the state of affairs indicated through the sense-organs, that motor response shapes the next sensory stimulus" (346).<sup>23</sup> Second, the discovery of biological evolution teaches "continuity of simpler and more complex organic forms. . . . As activity becomes more complex, coordinating a greater number of factors in space and time, intelligence plays a more and more marked role, for it has a larger span of the future to forecast and plan for. The effect upon the theory of knowing is to displace the notion that it is the activity of a mere onlooker or spectator of the world,

<sup>20</sup> *Experience and Nature*, 2nd ed. (1929), in LW 1.9, 211–25, 259–62. The first edition was published in 1925.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey here implicitly draws upon his own seminal article "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896), in EW 5.

the notion which goes with the idea of knowing as something complete in itself" (347). Here Dewey's principle of continuity implies a notion of growth, not merely a continuum.

## Part 4: Philosophy

The goal of chapter 24, which begins the final part of *Democracy and Education*, is to clarify the notion of philosophy implied in the previous chapters. Our puzzlement that this should be the purpose of the end of a book on democratic education is somewhat lessened when we are told that philosophy is "*the general theory of education*" (338). Philosophy, Dewey claims, is born of societal divisions or conflicts; the philosophical separation between theory and practice, for example, is derivative from the social separation between leisure and working classes. In other words, philosophical issues reflect certain dispositions. The only way to resolve social separations is through a change in dispositions; hence the need for education and the connection between philosophy and education. In that context, however, one may ask the following question: If philosophy results from the artificial, misleading separation of things that are continuous, such as soul and body, then should we not strive for a world in which philosophy does not exist?

But according to Dewey, philosophy is not inherently such artificial formulations. It needs "reconstruction," but it need not be confined to stating, or even refuting, false theories (341). It can work toward development of true theory. First, however, it must recognize the distinction between knowledge and thinking. Dewey equates "grounded knowledge" with science: "it represents objects which have been settled, ordered, disposed of rationally." Philosophy is identified with thinking, which "is occasioned by an *unsettlement* and ... aims at overcoming a disturbance. Philosophy is thinking what the known demands of us—what responsive attitude it exacts" (336). Philosophy is reactive, a response to science, as thinking is a response to knowledge. So philosophy must respect science; it must recognize the valid claim of science to be the sole avenue to truth. It must take its bearings from the conclusions of that method.

Once it does so, the path will be clear for development of a theory of knowledge. Contrary to certain intellectuals today who assert the separability of democracy from broader philosophical matters, Dewey argues that democracy needs to be concerned with epistemology: "[S]ince democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another" (354–55). The need for such a theory is educational: previous theories of knowledge have failed to note that, although knowledge takes account of what has happened, its function is prospective. Dewey faults both empiricist

and rationalist accounts of knowledge for selective emphasis on the particular and the general, respectively, and for failure to see how the particular and the general work together to reorganize experience (353). Discoveries in psychology, evolution, and experimental method make possible the development of a theory of knowledge that incorporates the continuity of simpler forms of life with the more complex, of body with mind.

Also needed, Dewey says, is development of a theory of morals that will not divorce knowledge from conduct. Here he opposes theories that separate motive from deed, as well as theories that separate self-interested action from principled action. A superior theory of morals will build on the observation that learning follows from activities having a social purpose and proceeding from normal social situations: “[T]he measure of the worth of the administration, curriculum, and methods of instruction of the school is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit” (368).

Because he concludes his book as he does, Dewey invites evaluation of his view of democratic education on the basis of his understanding of philosophy. As we have seen, he defines philosophy as “the general theory of education.” By “theory” here Dewey means not a giving of answers but an asking of questions. The phrase “philosophy of education” refers to “an explicit formulation of the problems of the formation of right mental and moral habitudes in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life.” Thus philosophy is “a form of thinking” (341). Here, I suggest, we find Dewey at his most undogmatic. Philosophy is essentially “*inquiring*,” only secondarily “[a]cquiring” (155). It is essentially love of wisdom, hence striving for wisdom, not possession of wisdom in doctrinal form.

For Dewey science, not philosophy, is the approach to knowledge. But his writings do not contain an effective response to the criticism made by Nietzsche and others since:<sup>24</sup> that science is as affected by the limitations of perspective as are other ways of thought, thus that it is not a legitimate model of knowledge. That criticism may or may not be sound, but Dewey shows some sympathy for it in other works. “The fundamental defect” of early political liberalism, he writes, “was its lack of perception of historic relativity.”<sup>25</sup> Liberalism did not realize that the notion of the individual in the state of nature could be used to stifle political liberty as well as to promote it; this happened when advocates of laissez-faire in economics attacked governmental intervention for the sake of the poor. “Ideas that at one time are means of producing social change have not the same meaning when they are used as means of preventing social change. This fact is itself an illustration

<sup>24</sup>For Nietzsche see, e.g., *Beyond Good and Evil*.

<sup>25</sup>The *Future of Liberalism* (1935), in LW 11.290. See also “Liberalism and Social Action” (1935), in LW 11.26; “Introduction to *Problems of Men*: The Problems of Men and the Present State of Philosophy” (1946), in LW 15.162–63.

of historic relativity.”<sup>26</sup> The crucial place accorded to science in Dewey’s thought does not seem to square with this historical relativism.

But Dewey disagrees; he sees a close connection between the scientific method and historical relativism. Science has taught us the lesson that the meaning and validity of ideas and principles vary with the purposes to which they are put. Thus Dewey claims, “The connection between historic relativity and experimental method is intrinsic.”<sup>27</sup> Since philosophy must bow to science, it cannot challenge the teaching of historical relativism but must adhere to it.

Dewey does not seem truly open to questioning the merits of science. The experimental philosophy of life “is itself a theory to be tested by experience.”<sup>28</sup> But by what sort of experience, by what standards, can we tell the worth of science, which is then to be applied toward the making of all moral judgments? Elsewhere, he writes that the experimental attitude toward life “is clearly a faith, not a demonstration. It too can be demonstrated only in its works, its fruits. . . . Perhaps the task is too hard for human nature. The faith may demonstrate its own falsity by failure. . . . But an honest soul will also admit that the failure is not due to inherent defects in the faith, but to the fact that its demands are too high for human power; . . . and that the experiment must be passed on to another place and time.”<sup>29</sup> Dewey’s theory of truth holds that the validity of a proposition must be tested by examining its consequences, its ability to resolve a problematic situation,<sup>30</sup> thus there is nothing inherent in the scientific faith that would lead us to accept or reject it. But that means that Dewey’s theory of truth assumes the validity of scientific method. When Dewey applies that theory to a test of scientific method itself, he can only beg the question.

In his later years Dewey had the misfortune of seeing his profession become even more impressed with science than he was: under analytic philosophy and logical positivism, ethics was banished to an inferior realm of “normativity.” Dewey managed to avoid that trap and related ones. But his failure to think more rigorously—more philosophically—about the relation between philosophy and science allowed Richard Rorty, his most famous recent spokesman, more plausibly to claim Dewey’s thought for his own, postmodern ends than would otherwise have been possible.

<sup>26</sup>“The Future of Liberalism,” in LW 11.291.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 292.

<sup>28</sup>*German Philosophy and Politics* (1915), in MW 8.201.

<sup>29</sup>“Pragmatic America” (1922), in MW 13.308–9.

<sup>30</sup>See, e.g., *How We Think* (1910), in MW 6.