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John Baldacchino

# John Dewey

## Liberty and the Pedagogy of Disposition

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John Baldacchino

# John Dewey

Liberty and the Pedagogy of Disposition



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*I dedicate this book to the memory of  
Frank A. Moretti*

*A dear friend, colleague and mentor  
who firmly believed in the power of the arts  
and education for the good of humanity*

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# Introduction

**Abstract** This introductory chapter sets the scene for a discussion of John Dewey's philosophy of education from the lenses of liberty and disposition. As we discuss education, our attention moves to how, beyond a system of schools and institutions, education is primarily a way of living in the world. This pragmatic turn on philosophy and education embodies the disposition of which Dewey speaks. But rather than taking an apologetic approach to Dewey, this chapter opens with Max Horkheimer's critique of Dewey's pragmatism. Horkheimer seems to say that the pragmatist takes on life as it is and not as it should be. He critiques the priority that pragmatists give to experimentation, which he regards as an exercise that simply replicates life as it finds what it anticipates in the first place. While not dismissing Horkheimer's critique, here it is argued that Dewey's position is equally critical of the very same assumptions. A Deweyan approach does not simply observe and receive. On the contrary, Dewey's approach to experimentation stems from thinking and acting as forms of intervention and criticality that evolve in their recognition of the contingent character of the world. As this introductory chapter engages with Horkheimer by presenting Dewey's counter-argument, it also sets the scene for this book's discussion of Dewey's habit for radical change. Against what Horkheimer describes as an "ideal pragmatist philosopher" who "remains silent," this book presents Dewey as the philosopher who *gently roars*. Citing Dewey, readers are invited to regard philosophy as a "combination of modesty and courage that affords the only way by which the philosopher can look his fellow man in the face with frankness and with humanity."

**Keywords** Education • Schooling • Learning • Experimentation • Pragmatism • Philosophy • Methods

## Gently Roaring

[Dewey's] philosophy is the most radical and consistent form of pragmatism, his own theory "means that knowing is literally something which we do; that analysis is ultimately physical and active; that meanings in their logical quality are standpoints,



attitudes, and methods of behavior towards facts, and that active experimentation is essential to verification." This, at least, is consistent, but it abolishes philosophical thought while it still is philosophical thought. The ideal pragmatist philosopher would be he who, as the Latin adage has it, remains silent.

—Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1974, p. 49)

I was invited to write a long 100-page essay on the work of John Dewey. The parameters for this essay could be described as those of education, though as soon as one uses the word *education*—especially next to John Dewey's philosophy—the challenge gains further complexity and produces a dilemma. The dilemma is elastic. It begins to stretch itself between the assumed familiarities with what appears to be an over-labored subject, to a series of assumptions about both Dewey and education that one needs to avoid in order to begin to make sense of the problem itself and deal with the elastic nature of what some would presume to be a "solution."

Starting with education per se, the main challenge is not simply to define it, because many would volunteer to do so and would invariably come with their own take on the subject. The challenge is to engage in a discussion that is open-ended enough not to limit the term *education* to just one meaning that is mistaken for a universal condition or necessity.

While it is easy to describe an object by its dimensions or functions, education is not that simple, because an objective description will lead to more questions than answers. Having said that, the subjective nature of education is not easily surmised by personal experience. To say that education becomes a subjective realm one cannot call this a scenario that gives *to each his own* and where everyone claims validity because everyone knows what he or she has experienced in their own education. Speaking from a Deweyan point of view, the distinction between subject and object is a no–no, indeed a theoretical *faux pas*. For Dewey the subject–object dichotomy is part of the problem.

As we find ourselves deep in questions, we need to reflect on how they are to be posed before we even assume that there could be any answer that would put our mind to rest. To begin with, one has to question what appears to be obvious: Is education a system of learning? Is it an institution? Is it just a collective noun for schooling? Is it equivalent to schooling? Is education a process by which we start from Kindergarten and move on, through various stages, heading toward the completion of what we would regard as compulsory schooling? And what happens after this period of compulsory learning? And why is schooling compulsory in the first place? What if I refuse to learn in a school? Even if I were to be home-schooled why should I follow a body of knowledge or a syllabus that someone else decides to set for me? And why should I submit to testing and examinations? Do examinations and schooling embody all that a person needs to know in the world? What about the extension of learning into a college, a community, a university, a polytechnic, an apprenticeship? How does that work for society?

Often it feels that whenever we start with education, we find ourselves talking about something else. Schooling and learning are taken for granted as

exchangeable categories of education, but that is not always the case. What about unlearning? What about undoing what we have done and learnt in schools or in our daily living? Why shouldn't we forget what we have been taught in schools or elsewhere and find other ways of solving the problems of life? Don't we actually do that all the time? Don't we have the freedom to unlearn?

Questions around education normally move into other realms, such as liberty and one's own rights. But before you know it, one is back on the question of education as if it could never be explained. What about the distinctions between learning, schools, knowledge, doing, making ... that emerge from education? And doesn't education deal with much more? Does it give me a new social standing? What about those famous people who made it and yet dropped out of college or even school? What does that tell us about education? What are the political implications of education? How does politics square up with education? Does education fulfill one's rights or is it a form of herding society into respective pens? Is this democratic? Is there a democratic system without education? Is education possible without democracy? ... so on and so forth.

Dewey's philosophy of education, as summed in his great work *Democracy and Education* (D&E<sup>1</sup>) and his extensive discussion of pedagogy in books like *The Child and the Curriculum* (C&C) and *The School and Society* (S&S), may or may not fit with what we expect him to tell us about the matter of education and all its ramifications. The reason being that as he speaks of education, Dewey cannot speak only about education. He takes off to what appears to be tangential to schools or children or whatever one expects to deal with education. This is done from a much larger picture that is found on a much wider horizon. Dewey confirms that it would make no sense whatsoever to take something like education outside the wider realms that make it. Whether schools are good for us or not is not what we want to know when we even speak of schooling. This is because the questions that we need to ask about education often begin where nothing is remotely educational.

## Bargaining, Experimenting

When we read and discuss Dewey, we often find ourselves striking deals, indeed bargaining with the ways of the world. This aspect of his philosophy is far from simply mundane. It is sophisticated and quite complex. Even when written in words that everyone understands, Dewey's work is compelling. It requires attention. It also expects its interlocutors—be they students, educators, philosophers, politicians, lawyers, workers, or activists—to be responsible for the approach that one takes in reacting to the questions in hand. This responsibility stems from the fact that Dewey's philosophy is never far away from our acts of

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of abbreviations of Dewey's major books cited, see References.

living. Even when his concepts appear abstract, they grow on the shared practical grounds of daily living.

Thus as we speak of education, we must also speak of what and how it features in our ways of living in the world, day in day out. It is not about high-flown subjects or disciplines. Even as we speak of academic disciplines, which appear to transcend reality, these very disciplines emerge from the consequences of the same daily occurrences in which we realize that we live together as a human species. As individuals forming a society we grow together from conditions where we are more immature than wise. This is because the decisions that we take are not embedded in prefixed ideas or conditions, but in the consequences of how we practice this daily living. This is what we mean when we refer to Dewey as being a pragmatist.

As he put it in an essay he wrote in 1905, “if getting knowledge, as distinct from having it, involves representatives, pragmatism carries with it a reinterpretation, and a realistic interpretation, of ‘states of consciousness’ as representations. *They are practically or effectively, not transcendentally, representative*” (Dewey 1905, p. 325, emphasis added). This representation is practical because it is tied to the realities of one’s own daily living. Dewey presents us with scenarios that are not beholden to a reality out *there*, but with a reality that evolves *here*, and on which we continuously reflect, and which we would never receive without question because it simply happens. This also means that as we experience life, we also experience it by re-presenting it to ourselves and to others in a social context that cannot be transcended from the collaborative nature of our own existence. These states of consciousness, these experiences to which we give meanings through our acts of being social, “represent in the sense in which a signature, for legal purposes, represents a real person in a contract; or as money, for economic purposes, represents beefsteak or a night’s lodging. They are symbols, in short, and are known and used as such” (Dewey 1905, p. 325).

This begins to explain what Max Horkheimer had to say about Dewey’s pragmatism and his philosophical stand. I choose the opening quote because it is critical and therefore invites one to take on Dewey not without question, but to the contrary, with the same state of consciousness that one approaches daily living. Horkheimer argues that Dewey’s philosophy is “the most radical and consistent form of pragmatism.” As we take these words one by one we could begin to piece together what this means in terms of a philosophy that is rooted in the practices of life. Horkheimer is not lamenting about this, but he is criticizing what he sees as an approach to reason and knowledge that appears to take on life with what comes, rather than with a predisposed concept of criticality that has to evaluate and ultimately change what we receive.

Horkheimer seems to say that the pragmatist takes on life as it is and not as it should be. This is particularly directed at the core of Dewey’s philosophy—that of experimentation. Horkheimer asks: “How is it possible to subject experimentation to the criterion of ‘being conceivable’ if any concept—that is to say, whatever might be conceivable—depends essentially on experimentation?” (Horkheimer 1974, p. 48). Indeed this is more than just a valid point. It is fundamental to how