

On American Philosophy

III.

John Dewey and the Chicago School

JOHN Dewey is unquestionably the one pre-eminent figure today in American philosophy; and if there could be such an office as that of national philosopher, no one else could properly be mentioned for it. The incomparable charm of William James's style has doubtless attracted more readers than the more closely knit technical arguments which make up Dewey's somewhat fragmentary philosophic writings. Yet it is a fact that Dewey is the only American to have established a new philosophic school, still known as the Chicago school. Whenever we meet with any apostles of the new philosophic dispensation called pragmatism or instrumentalism, we may be sure to find them using the arguments, metaphors, and phrases coined by John Dewey. That which in James is a matter of vision and intuitive suggestion becomes in the hands of Dewey a well organized argument that can be learned and taught, expounded and defended, used as a justification for educational policies, or as a battering ram against sanctimonious complacencies. Thus, the number and the aggressive enthusiasm of Dewey's disciples, not only in philosophy but in related realms, is rapidly increasing.

Clearly this extensive influence is due not only to rare personal qualities as a teacher, but also to the extent that his thought corresponds to the prevailing American temper of the age. His doctrine that all our ideas are, and ought to be, practical, i. e. instrumental for reforming the world and making it a better place to live in, appeals powerfully to popular utilitarianism, to the American worship of visibly practical results, of which Theodore Roosevelt was such a conspicuous representative. In a country where so many great deeds in the conquest of nature are still to be performed, the practical man's contempt for the contemplative and the visionary is reinforced by the puritanic horror of idle play and of that which is uselessly ornamental. To the pragmatic evolutionist, as to our preachers of the gospel of success, nature is like one of the prudent heroes of Smiles's *Self Help*. It never indulges in any play or riot of exuberant activity for its own sake. It generates intelligence only to help in the serious business of life. As a "come-outer" of the idealistic church Dewey carries with him the air of sober disillusion; but a philosophy which views external nature as just so much material to be transformed by our intelligence, appeals

to the thin optimism of an industrially prosperous people, which sees success as the sure reward of intelligent effort and finds no inherent obstacle to the establishment of a heaven on earth—though it will not do for practical people to inquire too curiously what should constitute such a heaven. Dewey's confidence in the power of human intelligence to change our environment is so strong that his attention is never solicited by the incurable evils which, in an imperfect world, every child of mortal men and women must face before reaching the crowning agonies of death. His most distinguished disciples, like Professors Bode and Addison Moore, do not hide their contempt for a philosophy that can serve as a consolation, or can admit that there are evils against which our only remedy is some form of wisely cultivated resignation.

The American temper, however, to which Dewey appeals, the temper which is known and likes to be known as practical-minded and distrustful of all forms of other-worldliness, is only a part of our national trait. It may be dominant in our industrial life and even in some of our churches which are trying to replace theology and religion with "social work." But there is another America, god-fearing and evangelical or vaguely spiritualistic, which though less noticed in our urban press and literature, is still perhaps the most dominant force in our country, as our Sunday legislation and the prohibition amendment may indicate. If we judge merely by the number of adherents, there can be no doubt that our distinctive national philosophy is the diluted and Americanized form of theosophy or neoplatonism which manifests itself in the various forms of New Thought, from Mother Eddy's Science and Health to R. W. Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite*, and which crops out in our Pollyanna literature. The books of no other intellectual or semi-intellectual movement find so many millions of readers among our tired men of affairs, as well as in more amply leisured feminine America. Now, orthodox Christians, as well as those who hunger for the newer mystic visions to save them from the dreary emptiness of worldly success, know from experience that salvation comes not solely through our own conscious efforts but depends on the grace of powers beyond us.

It is curious that the America which believes in faith above visible works gets no recognition in Dewey who comes from the rural state of Vermont, but finds dignified expression in William James who can be regarded as Celtic or European as much as American. In fact, however, we are dealing here

with a fundamental difference between two temperaments, which the older Henry James would have called the moralistic and religious. Dewey is essentially a moralist. His philosophy is full of the sense of responsibility, of tasks to be achieved, and of the possibilities of philosophy in helping us to perform our job more efficiently. Everything in his universe has a job or function and ought to be up and doing. The otiose observer, the one who idly admires the flowers of knowledge for their own sake rather than for their consequences, is the cardinal sinner. James, on the other hand, is essentially religious in his interests. His attention is attracted by that which makes things objects of love or worship rather than merely useful or instrumental. He is less interested in conduct than in the quality of life and our ultimate fate and well-being. Moral holidays solicit his attention more than the day's work. His frank belief in supernaturalism arises not so much out of a reasoned theory as to what really exists, as out of a sympathy with those who feel how little our conscious thought can shape our individual destinies, and how seldom the works of our hand can completely satisfy our heart's desire. With the austere self-control of the trained scientist, Dewey is willing to restrict his philosophy to that part of the cosmos for the handling of which he is technically equipped—the world of visible human conduct. Unlike James, who had a more rigid scientific training, Dewey is willing to abandon all interest in the mystery of the universe at large. He manifests no sense of the dark and unfathomable seas of being, wherein the world of human conduct occupies but an infinitesimal portion of time and space.

Despite the complexity of his sentences, which a too conscientious regard for accuracy causes to be overloaded with qualifications, Dewey is essentially one of those philosophers who, like Spinoza, impresses the world with their profound simplicity. He is entirely free from that human complexity which makes James capable of banishing the soul and even consciousness as psychologic entities, and yet capable of believing in subconscious minds, Fechner's earthspirits, and the like. Dewey is a thoroughgoing and consistent naturalist, i. e. one who accepts without question the method and the results of the natural sciences, especially Darwinian biology. In his youth he was an idealist, of the orthodox neo-Hegelian school, which professes to combine modern science and ancient religion in one harmonious system. Reflection, however, led him to find an incurable incompatibility between the diluted supernaturalism latent in idealism and the biologic or naturalistic account of the origin of consciousness which one gets from modern experimental psychology in such works as Spencer's or James's

Principles of Psychology. Whether because the consequent break with the idealistic school came too late in his intellectual life to enable him to ignore his former views and to throw himself unreservedly into the development of his new insight, or whether because the temptation of controversy and the prospect of securing the triumph of a righteous cause are too irresistible in the quiet monotony of academic life, the fact remains that an inordinate proportion of Dewey's philosophic writings is polemic in character. I cannot but regard this as a great loss to philosophy, since philosophers, like others, are generally more fortunate in giving us the substance of their own vision than in denying the vision of others. The polemic spirit generally leads to a sharpening of issues which is congenial to large and enthusiastic followings, but does not promote just insight into complicated problems.

That intelligence arises in the process of organic life and in furtherance of it, that the structure of our ideas can be understood only in the light of the transformations of our environment which they affect, is the central theme of Dewey's philosophy. When he applies it to current public issues it leads to a fresh reassertion of the liberal or hellenic element of civilization, viz. that action should be illumined by the freest intelligence. In the field of education, where his essentially psychologic philosophy finds most direct application, it means not only an intelligent appreciation of our environment but a liberalizing of human capacity. But when he addresses his fellow-philosophers he tends to emphasize the practical character of ideas in a way to do scant justice to their theoretic or contemplative function. From a scientific point of view pragmatism can establish what seems to me its inherently just claims only by actual analysis of our leading scientific ideas. But such analysis requires deliberate detachment and long patient labor which can be sustained only by a love of intellectual play for its own sake. The conditions of American philosophy today do not favor such laborious undertaking. Philosophers like others are expected to show immediate results. Dewey himself is by the natural subtlety of his mind and the immensity of his liberal knowledge eminently qualified to make pragmatism an achievement rather than a promising program. But missionary zeal for a righteous cause urges more immediate tasks and more hurried methods.

When, as in his *Democracy and Education*, and elsewhere, he is not engaged in controversy or propaganda, the rich sensitiveness and ingrained honesty of Dewey's mind shows itself at its best in his natural responsiveness to all sorts of diverse elements, in his habitual avoidance of sweeping or unqualified generalizations and of artificial dilemmas by which easy intellectual triumphs are obtained at

the cost of just discriminations. But when the spirit of combat is upon us, it becomes practically impossible to devote much attention to saving what is valuable in the enemy's cause. Thus when he insists that thinking arises as an effort to control our environment so as to get out of trouble, he is undoubtedly emphasizing an important and hitherto neglected truth. But the zeal of controversy leads him and his disciples to assert this, not as a general but as a universal or exclusive proposition, and thus to deny the Aristotelian view that philosophic knowledge arises from natural wonder or curiosity, from the desire to know just for the sake of knowing. Professor Moore is especially vehement in denying that there is a fundamental desire to know, coordinate with, rather than subordinate to, other desires. But no one who has ever watched unspoiled children, can deny the tremendous reality of the desire to know, not in order to throw light on the object of other desires but for its own sake. Nor should this desire be dismissed as childish. The history of science shows clearly that when this idle and unfettered curiosity about the world is indulged in as a joyous pastime, it leads to such momentous results as the discovery of mathematics by the Greeks or of modern physics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the other hand, when stoic philosophies rigidly insist that our thoughts should be directed to the ends of ordinary human conduct, they dry up the springs of intellectual vision. I mention this, not only to show the very serious danger to American philosophy from this neo-stoicism, but to illustrate how the controversial attitude cuts it off from the more adequate performance of its own task, to wit, the analysis of the nature of knowledge. For the tendency of philosophy is to stretch terms like "practical" to include everything, even the purely theoretical; but the tendency of controversy is to restrict terms so as to leave room for assailable alternatives. If the Holy Sepulchre be everywhere one cannot effectively preach a crusade to redeem it from the infidels.

That thought arises because of the desire to get out of trouble, is certainly true, if "desire to get out of trouble" is stretched to include what it does not ordinarily connote, such as the love of intellectual play, or the impulse to imitate, as when philosophers rush to adopt an idea like natural selection after it acquires eclat in biology. Knowledge is experimental—aye, if we recognize with Peirce that there are mental, as distinct from physical, experiments, and that pure mathematics is full of them. The truth of general propositions is to be tested by their consequences—certainly; but if this is to mean anything definite and not a mere shifting of the difficulty, we must have a real clue as to what consequences make a proposition true.

The old-fashioned assumption that there are certain absolute particular facts and that these of themselves can confirm or deny general beliefs, is one that a clear-minded man like Dewey cannot accept. For what we should consider the fact in a given case is never independent of previous assumption. Thus when Dewey rejects God, freedom, and immortality on the general ground that philosophic concepts can no longer serve as sanctions, he opens himself to the ad hominem argument that his alternative concepts, experience, evolution, and democracy are also sanctions, resting on no really superior evidence. The consequences of accepting one set of categories are assuredly different from the consequences of accepting the other. But that which determines people to accept one or other set of initial assumptions makes them differ also as to which set of consequences they regard as preferable, and the pragmatic test of truth does not in fact settle philosophic issues.

Though essentially a moralist, Dewey does not give us a clear answer to the fundamental ethical question, what is good? In trying to make the world better, what is to be the test as to which of two alternatives is the better? The reason for this failure comes out clearly in his essay on Nature's Good (in the volume called *The Influence of Darwin*). He is so averse to the old classical formulas for the summum bonum that made no particular difference in specific cases, that he falls back on a very naive ethical atomism: every situation has its own good. But that is to dodge the whole difficulty. For, not only does life fail to divide itself into a convenient number of disconnected "situations", but in every actual ethical problem, as he himself points out, there is a conflict between rival considerations. If, e. g. class exploitation is to be regarded as evil and rejected, it is to be rejected not only when it affects Mr. A or Mr. B, on the 5th or the 6th day of the month, but as a general rule to control judgments in particular cases.

When Dewey and his disciples insist that philosophy must serve human weal and welfare, they assert something which no one can or wishes to dispute. Compassion for human suffering is at the bottom of all that is noble in human effort. But the significant question really is, wherein does human weal consist? When they exclude from human welfare the philosophy which is naught but a distant vision, and can serve only as a consolation, or intellectual pastime, they seem to me to be falling into a most grievous error. For not only do consolations and pastimes—the essence of religion and fine art—most directly minister to human welfare by bringing us relief from anguish and offering us positive joy, but no human work could long prosper without them. A foolish use of pastimes and consolation

may indeed dull the edge of industry. But the humblest human wisdom has always recognized the dullness of naught but work. Vacations and holidays, wherein we can completely forget the routine of our daily tasks, are necessary, even in the interests of the narrowest kind of industrial efficiency. Nor would the pragmatist be inclined to overlook this obvious point, if it were not for the zeal to contrast sharply the spirit of the new as against the old philosophy. They are also misled by the phrase, "making the world a better place to live in," which suggests mastery of the environment rather than of our own desires. But so long as human desire outruns human capacity, even as the range of our vision exceeds the field of our reach, the way of happiness must include not only the mastery of nature but also the mastery of our own selves. The latter cannot be attained without fearless examination of the limitations of human capacity, due to the fact that we live in a world that is not expressly designed for human comfort. That is why no philosophy that lacks a cosmic outlook can hope to do full justice to the specifically human problem. Even if it were true, as Dewey contends, that the fate of the cosmos has no bearing on the specific issues of education, morals, or politics, it would still not be devoid of the profoundest human interest. In seeing human fate as part of a great cosmic drama, men rise above their petty limitations and learn to look upon their own passions and achievements with that measure of aloofness which is essential to the liberal life. In this respect pragmatists have never improved on the founder of their school, Chauncy Wright, who, though as rigorously scientific a mind as ever lived on this side of the Atlantic, could still admit that religion and metaphysics had probably done more for human happiness than the narrow evidence of material science can well estimate.

Though some degree of impartiality is necessary to render his account even intelligible, the philosophic critic knows that complete impartiality is unattainable, and that he must leave to the discriminating reader the task of discerning and correcting the distortion resulting from partisan bias. But if my account of Dewey fails to bring into proper relief the great positive achievements which make him one of the great figures of recent philosophy, the failure is due to the fact that I am writing not as much about Dewey's own vision as about the general tendency in American philosophy of which he is the most distinguished representative. With the kernel of pragmatism I am in hearty agreement. But it is difficult to emphasize properly such fundamental agreements as one has been habitually taking for granted. Having been led to philosophy through the concrete problems of physics and social policy, I share as a matter of course Dewey's scorn for

those who in indolent piety continue to worship at empty shrines. But I cannot grow enthusiastic at the sight of a really first-rate mind crusading against those for whom time is already erecting proper sepulchres. The multitude will not be fed by exhorting to work those who will be unproductive in any case. Nor does the interest of agriculture demand discontinuance of all worship. Rather ought we to look for new objects more worthy of human adoration. For the human need to worship is fundamental; and those most absorbed or skilled in producing the material necessities, the Sancho Panzas or the Huck Finns, always recognize the inherent superiority of those who can see visions, even if the latter be no better than those of Don Quixote or Tom Sawyer. For, where there is no vision, the human spirit perishes from suffocation.

As one who has been brought up in the humanistic tradition, Dewey himself loves to see things with their historic vistas. His own interest in the clean and dexterous manipulation of ideas is so strong that the keenness of his arguments arouses my breathless admiration. One might readily quote him to the effect that philosophy is vision, imagination, reflection, and that sympathetic understanding and the free play of ideas are superior to skill in the accumulation of external products. He is, therefore, perfectly sincere in protesting that when he speaks of the practical character of ideas he does not mean that they should minister to ends of the bread and butter type. But a philosophy must not be judged simply by the character and intention of the founder, but by its emphasis and general tendencies. And the main tendency of this crusade on behalf of the practical is undoubtedly to disparage and leave no room for purely theoretic studies like the theory of prime numbers, which for all their glory have not, and perhaps never will, find any application to the specific problems of conduct. Dewey himself seldom takes his illustrations of knowledge from theoretic sciences like mathematics or from the sort of knowledge that a philosopher acquires when he understands the pragmatic theory. He repeatedly expresses his dislike for "contemplative surveys of existence" or analyses of "what is past and done with." His greatest fear is lest philosophy should lose touch with that which for the moment absorbs the multitude, and he is never weary of trying to eliminate "otiose" or purely contemplative thought—forgetting in his plea for philosophy as a guide to action, that mere contemplation is itself a most intense kind of action, preferred to all other forms of action by great and richly experienced minds, like Plato, Aristotle, and Dante. Indeed, it is difficult for enthusiastic devotees of the idea of universal evolution to avoid altogether the genetic fallacy,

the confusion between the organic origin of knowledge and its present human value. But though vision may be an outgrowth of touch, it is certainly different and no longer restricted to the tangible.

Dewey's philosophy is essentially urban, industrial, and entirely public. There are no nooks in his universe which the soul can call its own. It is full of the sense of men hurrying to work, struggling against all sorts of material difficulty and the stupid selfishness of their fellow-beings, and finally succeeding by dint of superior intelligence in the manipulation of things. It is pervaded also by a noble indignation that there should be so many parasitic idlers and unused palaces, so much class exploitation. But there is no sense in it of natural sunlight or God's free air, wherein even now the children of men sometimes play in utter abandon. No sense of the loneliness of the individual human soul, facing the indifferent earth, sea, or sky, or the eternal procession of the stars that ever mock man's silly pretension to exalt himself as the master of the universe.

It would be idle for anyone to undertake today

a definitive judgment on Dewey's philosophical achievement. He is still fortunately in the prime of his intellectual activity, some years younger than was James when he published his *Pragmatism* and his *Pluralistic Universe*. But I doubt not that history will record that in an age of waning faith in human reason, he was one of the few who rallied those who believed in the cause of liberalism based on faith in the value of intellectual enlightenment. But the future may wonder at the naive and entirely uncritical way in which such a keen mind could accept the hypothesis or myth of universal evolution, and at his failure to recognize that despite its supreme worth, human intelligence is frail, pathetically impotent in the face of great physical stress, or vital impulse. Important as are the intellectual differences between men, we are all of the same clay as the insane and the criminal, even as the most potent and enlightened emperor, Marcus Aurelius, is father in the flesh to the unspeakable Commodus. Such reflections may be useless and unpleasant, but no philosophy can claim to be the liberating truth unless it faces them resolutely.

MORRIS R. COHEN.

Admiral Horthy, Dictator

SO the big Kolchak is out, and the little Kolchak is in. Hungary, at last, is made safe for democracy, and vice versa. Admiral Nicholas Horthy de Nagybanya, Commander-in-Chief of the Hungarian National Army, who on the sixteenth of November, A. D. 1919, rode into the streets of Budapest, mounted upon a white charger, the banner of the Holy Virgin, patron lady of Hungary, waving above his head, has become, by act of the newly-elected National Assembly, Regent of State. He thus has attained the Hungarian reality corresponding to the Russian pretence of the late lamented Supreme Ruler of Omsk. Hungary, at last, has a government of law and order, a government with which the Allies deem it fit to deal, a government blessed even by General Franchet d'Esperey, the master mind of French statesmanship in the Balkans.

The Russian line of development Kerensky-Lenin-Kolchak is closely paralleled by the Hungarian line Karolyi-Kun-Horthy. Karolyi, like Kerensky, represented the intellectual radical element—the Gironde of his particular revolution. Karolyi, like Kerensky, cherished an unrequited love for the Entente. Karolyi, like Kerensky, saw his dream of a pro-Ally constitutional democracy shattered by Allied ignorance and hostility. Karolyi, like Kerensky, sent to Paris one frantic

appeal for help after the other. Karolyi, like Kerensky, was not heard. So Karolyi, like Kerensky, was eliminated, and Bela Kun came in, just as Lenin had come in, to mend himself what the Allies refused to help mending.

Now here appears a little hitch in the analogy. The little hitch consists in the statistical fact that there are 130,000,000 Russians, but only 10,000,000 Hungarians. Also, the distance between Omsk and Moscow is 1500 miles; the distance between Siofok, the Omsk of the Hungarian Supreme Ruler, and Budapest is only 65 miles. So Kolchak did not get to Moscow, although he was assisted by the first-rate powers of Britain, France and Japan. On the other hand, Horthy did get to Budapest, although assisted only indirectly by the mere fourth-rate power of Rumania. The Russian Admiral Horthy tried to march upon Moscow from behind the skirts of the Right Honorable Winston Spencer Churchill, and failed miserably. The Magyar Admiral Kolchak tried to march upon Budapest from behind the skirts of the Allied missions at Budapest, and proved a conspicuous success. On November 16th last he entered Budapest, at the head of his gallant army, fresh from the victories gained over the Jewish civilian population of western Hungary. He was acclaimed by the unanimous ovations of the people of Buda-