

# John Dewey at Eighty\*

BY ROBERT BIERSTEDT

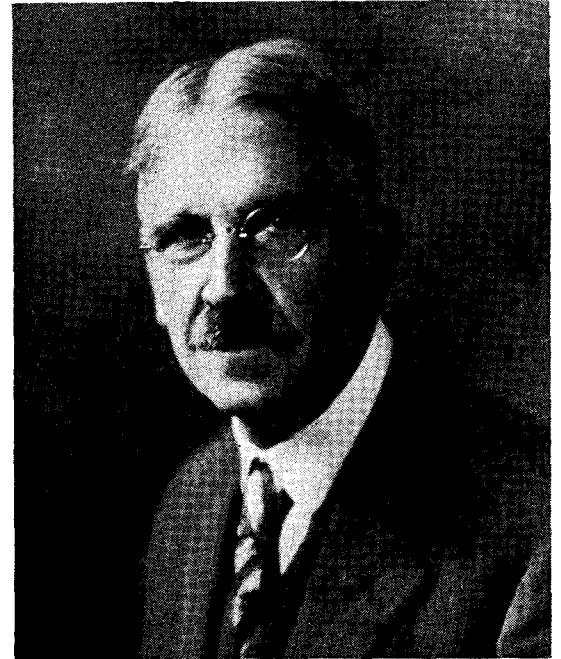
WHEN the stars of destiny blinked down upon the year 1859, they apparently found it good, for they blessed it with a number of events which have profoundly influenced the cultural history of the Western world. Among the more important of these events were the publication of Karl Marx's "Critique of Political Economy," of John Stuart Mill's "Essay on Liberty," and of Charles Darwin's "Origin of Species," and the births in Europe of Havelock Ellis and Henri Bergson and, in Burlington, Vermont, of John Dewey. The appearance of the three volumes listed below bear eloquent witness to the importance of this last event and help to celebrate the eightieth birthday of the man who, more than anyone else, turned the radical philosophies of the day of his birth into the commonplaces of today.

The word "commonplace" has reference to nothing common in the derogatory sense, but means instead the shared experiences of the race of men who happen to be alive in these centuries and in this culture. These "commonplaces," which at first resemble the "homely truths" a Vermonter might expound around the apple barrel, transform themselves upon reflection into subtle and deeply penetrating observations on the human and historical scene and especially on that segment of it which is peculiarly American. To suggest the essential Americanism of John Dewey, to place the philosopher himself into a cultural context, does not imply, as Bertrand Russell does, that Dewey's pragmatism represents the philosophic expression of a sprawling industrialism and sordid commercialism of a new and rapidly growing capitalistic economy in the land west of the Atlantic, where success became the sole measure of achievement and expediency the only guide to action. Dewey had his own answer to that when he ranked it with those interpretations of philosophy

which would assert "that English neo-realism is a reflection of the snobbish aristocracy of the English and the tendency of French thought to dualism an expression of an alleged Gallic disposition to keep a mistress in addition to a wife."

Nor can anyone today associate the word "commonplace" with immutable and incorrigible truth. No such concept appears in Dewey's philosophy, and he remains the man whom no one and no theory has ever persuaded to use "truth" consistently in the singular or to spell it with a capital letter. The commonplaces, if such they be, reside in the scientific method and the possibility of applying it to all the issues of philosophy, not only at those moments of historical hesitation when consequences occur, but through the continuous flow of social process and human behavior. As Mr. Auden has brilliantly—and plitudinously—expressed it, "At any moment in history there always is an orthodoxy." John Dewey's philosophy is perhaps the only one, in philosophy's long history, that can give a naturalistic account of the transition from one orthodoxy to another, whether the heterodoxies submitted to transvaluation relate to a theory of human nature, to a "truth" of science, or to the moral obligations which form the premises of government. The Heraclitean flux need no longer bother us, and this is no slight achievement.

For other achievements the reader will do well to turn to the symposium edited by Professor Schilpp, the first in a projected series of volumes on living philosophers. In addition to a fairly comprehensive biography of its subject, written in illuminating fashion by Jane M. Dewey, Evelyn Dewey Smith, and Lucy Dewey Brandauer, the book presents a series of expository and critical essays by contemporary philosophers, a long reply to both by the master himself, and a bibliography of his writings from the first published paper on "The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism" in 1882 to the "Freedom and Culture" of to-



John Dewey

day, a list which runs to the astonishing total of sixty-six pages.

Unfortunately, it is possible only to indicate the names of the contributors whom Dewey, in his response, classifies into three groups: those who have been students or colleagues, whose essays are largely though not entirely encomiastic; those whose expositions Dewey considers essentially correct although their conclusions remain at variance with his own; and finally those more critical essays which go so far as to express skepticism, in part at least, as to the success with which Dewey has carried on his philosophic enterprise. To the first group belong Joseph Ratner, George R. Geiger, John L. Childs, William H. Kilpatrick, Donald A. Platt, and John Herman Randall, Jr.; to the second, Gordon Allport, Dominique Parodi, William Savery, and Alfred North Whitehead; and in the third, Hans Reichenbach, Stephen C. Pepper, Edward L. Schaub, Henry W. Stuart, Arthur E. Murphy, Bertrand Russell, and George Santayana.

Reading these essays along with Dewey's brilliant defense, in which his pen often strikes sparks, becomes an adventure in the kind of ideas which in their ceaseless conflict and in some mysterious manner add their elusive content to human knowledge. Taking them all together, thrust and riposte, they forever refute the dictum of Denham, the English poet who believed that

The tree of knowledge, blasted by disputes,  
Produces sapless leaves instead of fruits.

Although these controversies hardly warrant the name of "dispute" on the one hand, and although they fail to

\*THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN DEWEY. Edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University, 1939. 708 pp., with index. \$4.

JOHN DEWEY. By Sidney Hook. New York: The John Day Co. 1939. 242 pp. \$2.  
FREEDOM AND CULTURE. By John Dewey. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1939. 176 pp. \$2.

terminate in agreement on the other, they all shed light on the central questions of philosophy, and no one can find more strenuous exercises for his intelligence nor finer insights for his intellect than by giving this valuable volume the diligent study it deserves.

Sidney Hook, in his birthday gift, draws an intellectual portrait in which the controversial details recede into relative insignificance, but which serves its own purpose no less admirably. Following a comparatively long chapter on John Dewey the man, he goes on to summarize the whole of Dewey's work under such titles as philosophy and culture, the nature of ideas, truth, logic and action, body, mind and behavior, standards, ends and means, the good society, the frontiers of education, art as experience, nature and man, and the philosopher of American democracy. No man could desire more earnest tribute than this, that one of his students should undertake to do for a less sophisticated public what the contributors to "The Philosophy of John Dewey" do for those who speak the technical language more fluently, and who, in the bargain, does it so well.

"Freedom and Culture" has been reserved for last, primarily because it concerns itself with only a small landscape in that vast horizon over which John Dewey's thought has roamed. Here he begins with an analysis of the conditions which encouraged the development of democracy in America, and concludes that however beneficent in dream or penetrating in vision, the fundamental premises of colonial democracy were affiliated with theories of human nature which no longer command assent. The task to be accomplished, then, concerns the rebuilding of the same political and humane principles on premises more biologically and anthropologically relevant and thus in accord with the lights of modern science.

Dewey abhors a sociological generalization as nature abhors a vacuum, and probably for the same reason. He particularly abhors the kind of anti-scientific generalization which Marxism, in its doctrinal insistency, represents. His submission of "monolithic" Marxism to the test of an experimental logic results in the most devastating critique of it in existence. In fact, Dewey largely sums up the implications of his entire philosophy when he says that his criticism of Marxism

is not directed then to any generalization made by Marx on the basis of observation of actual conditions. On the contrary, the implication of the criticism is the necessity for continued observation of actual conditions, with testing and revision of

all earlier generalization on the basis of what is now observed. The inherent theoretical weakness of Marxism is that it supposed a generalization that was made at a particular date and place . . . can obviate the need for continued resort to observation, and to continual revision of generalizations in their office of working hypotheses. In the name of science, a thoroughly anti-scientific procedure was formulated.

In answer to Strachey's defense of intolerance on the grounds of science, Dewey remarks that "literary persons" have, in this country, been most influenced by Marxism, "since they are the ones who, having the least amount of scientific attitude, swallow most readily the notion that 'science' is a new kind of infallibility." For this doctrine alone the angels will have to erase Abou Ben Adhem's name from the top of the list and write there the name of Dewey. For science is not ultimate truth but only — and superbly — a technique for solving problems. In the resolution of problematic situations and in the appeasement of tantalizing doubt lies its entire justification. It is not surprising, then, that Dewey should indict Marxism for its lack of appreciation of the Peircean principle of "fallibilism" in science, nor that he should say, "It is ironical that the theory which has made the most display and the greatest pretense of having a scientific foundation should be the one which has violated most systematically every principle of scientific method."

Positively, Dewey insists not so much on the necessity of democracy in order to pursue scientific investigation (a conclusion which is historically false) but that democracy needs all the efforts of science to give it significance and direction. Freedom itself, like all aspects of behavior, is relevant to a cultural context, and democracy means a particular attitude of human beings and "is measured by consequences produced in their lives." It means also a particular relationship between the human organism and its cultural environment and, in other language, a fundamental faith in the dignity of the human personality, a faith so steadfast and so virile that it can countenance and even welcome disagreement on any grounds whatsoever. Democracy implies, finally, an assurance of the possibility of the application of science to moral problems, and an appreciation of the moral obligation to preserve the humanistic culture with which it so intimately allies itself.

This is Dewey's common

faith in politics, but it is also something more. It is a belief in the practical and theoretical efficacy of the scientific method whatever the problems which challenge solution. If this, too, be a faith, it is only necessary to say that faith in science solves more human problems than faith in faith itself, or to assert with Hippocrates that "Science and faith are two things; the first begets knowledge, the second, ignorance." And so John Dewey goes his estimable way, still treading with firm step in the places where men and women encounter trouble and travail, still faithful to the philosophic enterprise to which he dedicated himself so long ago and which continues to stimulate him to activity. Philosophy itself, as Whitehead has remarked, never recovers from the impact of a great philosopher. Had the good Bishop Berkeley survived Dewey, he could not have defined a philosopher as a person who kicks up a lot of dust and then complains because he can't see clearly. No critic, however severe, has ever aimed that indictment at Dewey. And Henry Adams, too, would have to forget that he once identified philosophy with "that amusement which consists of thinking up unintelligible answers to insoluble problems." The insoluble problems have long since succumbed to the rigors of John Dewey's pragmatic logic, and no answer can remain unintelligible when it eases the problematic situations in which human beings find themselves and refers, with a consistency born of constant emphasis, to the cultural and biological matrix in which they happen.

## Class of '29

*SEVEN AGAINST THE YEARS. By Sterling North. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1939. 326 pp. \$2.50.*

Reviewed by JAMES GRAY

STERLING NORTH has had the courage and the craftsmanship to master admirably, in his new novel, a theme which must have tempted and intimidated the imagination of many a writer. He follows a group of bright young men as they trudge blindly, doggedly, or resolutely through the decade after their graduation from college to see what the impact of experience does to their high hopes.

There are seven variations on the theme. Each deals with one of the young men introduced in a pre-



Pinchot  
Sterling North