

## Lecture Supplement on Dewey's "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" [1939]<sup>[1]</sup>

Copyright © 2025 Bruce W. Hauptli

In our text there is an essay by Reinhold Niebuhr which critically reviews Dewey's *Liberalism and Social Action* [1935] as well as a section from that work.<sup>[2]</sup> Niebuhr [1892-1971] was an American theologian, ethicist, and liberal social theorist. Like Dewey he was a leading public intellectual and they offered competing views of the nature and justification of democracy. Robert Westbrook notes that

...Dewey's philosophy emphasized the moral resources and slighted the limitations of human nature, and Niebuhr's was weighted in the opposite fashion. Niebuhr found that man "constitutionally corrupts his purest visions of disinterested justice," while Dewey asked why he had "to believe that every man is born a sonofabitch even before he acted like one, and regardless of why or how he becomes one?" Dewey worried more about despair than arrogance and Niebuhr more

about arrogance than despair. Dewey spoke of God to comfort his readers; Niebuhr spoke of God to discomfort his.<sup>[3]</sup>

Dewey did not devote extended time to replying to Niebuhr's criticisms, but Niebuhr's vision of democracy became more popular with the public after World War II. As Westbrook notes, by the time of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday (where this essay we are discussing was read), Dewey was widely honored, especially by liberals and democratic socialists, but his philosophical theories were under-appreciated. On this occasion

Dewey established the pattern for the speeches he would give on similar occasions for the next decade. He admonished his audience to remember that **"creative democracy" remained an ideal and not a fact of life in the United States—a "task before us."** Surveying the events of his long lifetime, he noted that Americans could no longer rely on the frontier to regenerate democracy as they had in his childhood.<sup>[4]</sup>

Westbrook goes on to cite the following passage from "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" which is in our text on pp. 240-241:

at the present time, the frontier is moral not physical. The period of free lands that seemed boundless in extent has vanished. Unused resources are now human rather than material. They are found in the waste of grown men and women who are without the chance to work, and in the young men and women who find doors closed where there was once opportunity. The crisis that one hundred and fifty years ago called out social and political inventiveness is with us in a form which puts a heavier demand on human creativeness.

Dewey believed that the creativity he called for was necessary because for too long too many had believed that democracy would survive and prosper without individuals having to exert specific effort. Dewey contends, however, that

[241] ...democracy is a *personal* way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life. Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes.

[242] Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display into one another in the incidents and relations of daily life.<sup>[5]</sup>

[242-243] Democracy is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished. I have been accused more than once and from opposed quarters of an undue, a utopian, faith in the possibilities of intelligence and in education as a correlate of intelligence. At all events, **I did not invent this faith. I acquired it from my surroundings as far as those surroundings were animated by the democratic spirit.** For what is the faith in democracy in role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except **faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication.** I am willing to leave to upholders of totalitarian states of the right and the left the view that faith in the

capacities of intelligence is utopian. For the faith is so deeply embedded in the methods which are intrinsic to democracy that when a professed democrat denies the faith he convicts himself of treachery to his profession.

When Dewey says "Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed," he is neither availing himself of an "appeal to faith" nor referencing some "established creed." Instead he is [optimistically, even in light of the Fascist and Communist challenges of the day--1939] maintaining that **democratic government can provide for a moral social order which is not in the service of any external authority, but instead fosters both individual and social development:**

[244] ...democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the **aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness**. Every other form of moral and social faith rests upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control; to some "authority" alleged to exist outside the process of experience. Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing processes. Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education. All ends that are cut off from the ongoing processes become arrests, fixations. They strive to fixate what has been gained instead of using it to open the road and point the way to new and better experiences.

Of course the ensuing final two paragraph of the essay continuation his thoughts here, but I will not reproduce it here. The important points emphasized in this discussion are:

-when ends or values are cut off from on-going processes, they become lifeless and dead.

-experience is the condition of individuals interacting with their surrounding conditions (physical, social, psychological, and valuational).

-current needs, desires, and values (which themselves grow out of prior experiences, beliefs, desires, needs, and values) grow new purposes and directions of effort, and lead the agent to "go beyond what exists—"...they continually open the way into the unexplored ad unattained future."

**-democracy focuses on the "process of experience" as both a means and an end** (in a continuing feed-back loop) which uses inquiry and science to direct further experience to bring new experiences and values.

Where democracy does not obtain, the available ways of life:

[245] ...limit the contacts, exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humanistic experience in which all share and to which all contribute.

(end)

[6] John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," was first read at a dinner in honor of Dewey in New York on 10/20/1939, then published in *John Dewey and the Promise of America* Progressive Education Booklet No. 14 (Columbus: American Education Press, 1939), and reprinted *The Later Works*, v. 14. The selection we are discussing appear in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), on pp. 240-245, and page references here refer to this reprint and emphasis has sometimes been added to the passages.

[Return to Course Webpage](#)

[Go to My Webpage](#)

I greatly appreciate comments and corrections--typos and infelicities are all too common and the curse of "auto-correct" plagues me!

[Email me comments on this](#)

File revised on 09/27/25

---

[2] Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Pathos of Liberalism” [1935] in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, *ibid.*, pp. 153-157—the essay was originally published in *The Nation* on September 11, 1935; and was a response to Dewey's *Liberalism and Social Action* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935) a selection from that work appears as “Renascent Liberalism” [1935] on pp. 142-152 of *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, *op. cit.*

[3] Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1991), p. 530.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 533. Emphasis (bold) has been added to the passage.

[5] Cf., Thomas M. Alexander, “Introduction” to John Dewey's *A Common Faith* [1934] (Second Edition) (New Haven: Yale UP., 2013), pp. ix-xxxvi, p. xx and pp. xxii-xxiii.