Lecture Supplement on Dewey's "The Democratic Conception In Education" [1916][1]

While the book this selection is taken from talks at length about the importance of education for democracy, this selection focuses on three historical periods where education was not considered to be important for promoting democracy: Plato's ideal state, the "individualistic ideal" of the 18th Century, and the subsequent view that education should promote the ideal of the "particular nation state." His discussion will both set the scene for his rejection of these views and for his discussion education in and for democracy. As we have already seen, Dewey is very concerned with contrasting his philosophical orientation from those of earlier thinkers. Part of this is the result of the "newness" of his naturalism (or pragmatism), but such contrasts are also important to his view that these new philosophic orientations provide support for the new sort of evolving democratic society he finds us living in. Dewey's life-long concern with educational theories isn't simply the result of the fact that democracies rest on popular suffrage, and, thus, require an educated populous. At a deeper level, for Dewey, it is because *democracies to promote both* ***greater individualism*** and ***broader communities of interest*** that education theory becomes of central importance. The maintenance and cultivation of these propensities is required because

110-111 a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of **associated living**, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.

111-112 We begin, then, with an excellent one page summary of **Plato's ideal** and then Dewey maintains:

113 while [Plato] affirmed with emphasis that the place of the individual in society should not be determined by birth or wealth or any conventional status, but by his own nature as discovered in the process of education, he had no perception of the uniqueness of individuals. For him they fall by nature into classes and into a very small number of classes at that. Consequently the testing and sifting function of education only shows to which one of the three classes an individual belongs. There being no recognition that each individual constitutes his own class, there could be no recognition of the infinite diversity of active tendencies and combinations of tendencies of which an individual is capable.

113-114 …progress in knowledge has made us aware of the superficiality of Plato's lumping of individuals and their original powers into a few sharply marked-off cases; it has taught us that original capacities are indefinitely numerous and variable. It is but the other side of this fact to say that in the degree in which society has become democratic, social organization means utilization of the specific and variable qualities of individuals, not stratification by classes. Although his educational philosophy was revolutionary, it was none the less in bondage to static ideals. He thought that change or alteration was evidence of lawless flux; that true reality was unchangeable. Hence while he would radically change the existing state of society, his aim was to construct a state in which change would subsequently have no place. The final end of life is fixed: given a state framed with this end in view, not even minor details are to be altered.

114 Finally, for Dewey, the fact that Plato could not adopt a "gradualist" approach where gradual educational improvements might yield a better, and better society showed there was a real problem with his view:

-114 correct education could not come into existence until an ideal state existed, and after that education would be devoted simply to its conservation. For the existence of this state he was obliged to trust to some happy accident by which philosophic wisdom should happen to coincide with possession of ruling power in the state.

In these criticisms of Plato's view we can see two fundamentally different sorts of philosophical critique: external and internal. In the **external sorts of critique** one identifies problems in a thinker's orientation which arise because it conflicts with one's own views (which provide one with a reason to reject the view or argument, but seen to require one to provide some positive reasons for accepting one's own views as opposed to those of your opponent); while in the **internal sort of critique** one identifies problems which arise within the thinker's own view (which should lead even the thinker herself to see the need for adjustments to the views or arguments). As we come to understand Dewey's view, I am hoping we can find that he offers a strong argument for adopting a democratic rather than a [Platonic] "aristocratic" one!

114-116 Of course there were a large number of intellectual periods between Plato and Dewey, but in this selection Dewey next looks at the **"individualistic" social theorists of the 18th Century**. Here the diversity of individuals and the need to foster the free development of such individuality (which will be important for Dewey) is accepted. For the thinkers Dewey wishes to focus on here [114] **"social arrangements were thought of as mere external expedients by which these nonsocial individuals might secure a greater amount of private happiness for themselves."** That is states were to

provide individuals with the opportunity to develop their individuality. Of course, for these thinkers there was to be *social development*, but that development would be one of increasing *cosmopolitanism*, but:

114 the doctrine of extreme individualism was but the counterpart…of the ideals of the indefinite perfectibility of man and of social organization having a scope as wide as humanity. The emancipated individual was to become the organ and agent of a comprehensive and progressive society.

115 the heralds of this gospel were acutely conscious of the evils of the social estate in which they found themselves. They attributed these evils to the limitations imposed upon the free powers of man. Such limitation was both distorting and corrupting. Their impassioned devotion to emancipation of life from external restrictions which operated on the exclusive advantage of the class to whom a past feudal system consigned power….To give "nature" full swing was to replace an artificial, corrupt, and inequitable social order by a new and better kingdom of humanity.

For such thinkers education was to free one from limitations as well as false beliefs and ideals. But this left it to "nature" to provide the education of humanity. Here there is an obvious weakness:

115 merely to leave everything to nature was, after all, but to negate the very idea of education; it was to trust to accidents of circumstance. Not only was some method required but also some positive organ, some administrative agency for carrying on the process of instruction. The "complete and harmonious development of all powers," having as its social counterpart an enlightened and progressive humanity, required definite organization for its realization.

Thus romantic theorists who wished to promote this sort of social theory (Dewey speaks of Johan Heinrich Petalossi, a Swiss pedagogue influenced by Rousseau who helped eliminate illiteracy in Switzerland by 1830) and promoted public education.

114-118 Unfortunately in Europe this led to a rather different "ideal" which he discusses in Section 5 of the article "Education as National and as Social." Here the individual recedes into the background, and the **development of the state replaces the development of the individual**. This led to a transformation in educational theory:

116 under the influence of German thought in particular, education became a civic function and the civic function was identified with the realization of the ideal of the national state. The "state" was substituted for humanity; cosmopolitanism gave way to nationalism. To form the citizen, not the "man," became the aim of education.

117 since the maintenance of a particular national sovereignty required subordination of individuals to the superior interests of the state both in military defense and in struggles for international supremacy in commerce, social efficiency was understood to imply a like subordination. The educational process was taken to be one of disciplinary training rather than of personal development.

On pp. 117-118 Dewey discusses the difference between Kant's "cosmopolitan" views and Fichte and Hegel's "nationalistic" views.

Dewey then draws two "conclusions" from this quick historical survey:

118-119 first that discussions of educational theory need to be tied to their social contexts—this is elaborated below on pp. 119-120.

119-120 secondly: [119] **one of the fundamental problems of education in and for a democratic society is set by the conflict of a nationalistic and a wider social aim**. The earlier cosmopolitan and "humanitarian" conception suffered both from vagueness and from lack of definite organs of execution and agencies of administration….
This confusion corresponds to the existing situation of human intercourse. On the one hand, science, commerce, and art transcend national boundaries. They are largely international in quality and method….At the same time, the idea of national sovereignty has never been accentuated in politics as it is at the present time [1916]….This contradiction… between the **wider sphere of associated and mutually helpful social life** and the **narrower sphere of exclusive and hence potentially hostile pursuits and purposes**, exacts of educational theory a clearer conception of the meaning of "social" as a function and test of education than has yet been attained.

This leads him to ask "is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a nation state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?"

On p. 120, he offers the possibility that this can be accomplished in a democratic society like his [ours]. An important aspect of his rejection of the earlier philosophical propensities is that philosophy must accept a **contextualization** which replaces *a priori* thinking, the search for first principles, and atomistic empirical thinking with a recognition that we must

[and can only] theorize from within the current context—a in science, we must use the current beliefs and theories as we seek to develop new and better ones. The question, as he sees it, then, is “how can we better resolve our “common,” “industrial,” “scientific,” and “vaulational” problems?” How can we come to develop a theory which, when tested against the future, works better for us. Rather than engaging in a philosophizing independently of our particular context, he sees us (to borrow a metaphor from Otto Neurath) as **on-board shipwrights** who lack access to a dry-dock and must work to repair an improve their ship (habit, beliefs, and theories) while afloat on their current vessel.[2]

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

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File revised on 09/27/25

[1] John Dewey, “The Democratic Conception In Education,” was first published in his *Democracy and Education* (NY: Macmillan, 1916). It is revised and reprinted *The Middle Works*, v. 9. The selection we are discussing appears in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 110-120. The page references here refer to this reprint and emphasis has sometimes been added to the passages.

[2] *Cf*., Otto Neurath, “Protocol Sentences,” trans. George Schick, *Erkenntnis* v. 3 (1932/1933). Reprinted in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A.J. Ayer (NY: Free Press, 1959), pp. 199-208, *cf.* p. 201.