

Dewey, John (20 Oct. 1859-1 June 1952), philosopher and educator, was born in Burlington, Vermont, the son of Archibald Sprague Dewey, a shopkeeper, and Lucina Artemisia Rich. Dewey's childhood and adolescence were influenced by his mother's strict Calvinism, his father's taste for British literature, and his contact with family friends on the faculty at the University of Vermont. His enrollment at the university in 1875 exposed him to Darwinian evolutionary theory and the speculative and social philosophy taught by Henry A. P. Torrey. Outside the classroom Dewey became an avid reader of progressive periodicals whose contributors espoused versions of evolution, positivism, and agnosticism. Undecided about a profession after his graduation in 1879, he taught high school on an interim basis and with the help of a relative secured a position in Oil City, Pennsylvania. In 1881 he left Oil City to teach in a small school near Burlington so that he could continue to study philosophy with Torrey.

Encouraged by the publication of his essay in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in April 1882 and by support from Torrey, Dewey enrolled in his graduate school at the Johns Hopkins University in 1882. He studied logic with [Charles S. Peirce](#) and experimental psychology with [G. Stanley Hall](#), but it was [George Sylvester Morris](#) who had the most immediate influence upon his development. Dewey later claimed that Morris's neo-Hegelian idealism helped him to resolve the "dualisms" of New England culture. Dewey was awarded his doctorate in 1884 and was soon hired as an instructor at the University of Michigan by Morris, who had become a full-time member of the Michigan faculty the previous year.

While at the University of Michigan Dewey published two essays in the British journal *Mind* in 1886 and his first major book, *Psychology* (1887), establishing his international reputation. These works attempt to unite into a single system the neo-Hegelianism of Morris and the experimental psychology of Hall, or, as Dewey put it, to identify psychology with "philosophic method." During these years he moved toward a more liberal religious stance as well as toward what he would later term "instrumentalism," the view that ideas are tools for resolving and reconstructing problematic situations. Dewey's second major book, a critique of Leibniz's *New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding*, followed in 1888.

Among Dewey's students during his first years at Michigan was Harriet Alice Chipman ([Alice Chipman Dewey](#)), a sensitive and energetic young woman whose interest in public affairs greatly influenced his own. Married on 28 July 1886, they had seven children.

In 1888 Dewey left Michigan to accept the chair of philosophy at the University of Minnesota. After just a few months, however, Morris died suddenly, and Dewey was recalled to Michigan as department head. There he wrote *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891) and *The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus* (1894), works that reveal several important transformations in Dewey's thought. He abandoned the Hegelian notion of a super-conscious absolute spirit and accepted [William James](#)'s characterization of the human being as a biological organism in a concrete environment, a responsible self that observes, judges, and makes. Consequently, he became convinced that the split in ethical theory posited by David Hume and others between the "is" and the "ought" was unwarranted and that ethics could be based on the scientific method. The "ought," he wrote in his essay "Moral Theory and Practice" (1891), is itself an "is"--the "is" of action. He also began to argue that metaphysics had "had its day"; that is, that a science of "direct, practical truths" was possible without metaphysics.

In 1894 Dewey accepted a position at the University of Chicago as head of the department of philosophy, which included psychology and pedagogy. At his urging, pedagogy was incorporated as a separate department of education, and he was appointed its head as well. One of Dewey's most important publications during his decade at Chicago was "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896), in which he attacked the basis of stimulus-response psychology and offered a more complex model of an organism interacting with its environment by means of selecting and conditioning its own stimuli. In 1942 this essay was voted the most important contribution to *Psychological Review* during the journal's first fifty years of publication. Dewey served as president of the American Psychological Association in 1899-1900.

The social ferment in Chicago during Dewey's years there profoundly altered his political views. Even though he thought the university's atmosphere unduly repressive, he avoided confrontation with the administration and urged his colleagues to do likewise. Nevertheless, Dewey's private correspondence during this period reveals a growing social progressivism, and he participated in the activities of [Jane Addams](#)'s Hull House.

Dewey's social concern was also expressed in his growing commitment to pedagogical reform. His *School and Society* (1899) and the University Elementary School (also called the Dewey School and the Laboratory School), which he founded in 1896, sought a middle ground between two conflicting schools of pedagogy. At one extreme, the "curriculum-centered" view advanced by U.S. Commissioner of Education [William Torrey Harris](#) held that children should be drilled on the accumulated wisdom of civilization. At the other extreme, the "child-centered" view advanced by G. Stanley Hall argued that subject matter was secondary to the natural expression of the child's impulses. Dewey maintained that these conflicting views presented an artificial and unnecessary dichotomy: the aim of pedagogy should be to correlate impulse and subject matter and to find ways of subjecting ideas to the test of concrete experience. Dewey sought to develop a pedagogy that would take into account America's growing industrialization and urbanization and that would place educational practice in the context of a wider understanding of democracy. His *Experience and Education* (1938), for example, argued that education should conform both to the child's developmental stages and to the child's environment outside the classroom. His method of abstracting the best elements of opposing viewpoints and reconstructing them into novel alternatives became a hallmark of his life's work.

Dewey's Chicago years are also notable for his work in logic, which culminated in the publication with several colleagues of *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903). In this work Dewey articulated for logic a functional instrumentalism similar to the one William James had developed for psychology.

Growing differences between Dewey and University of Chicago president [William Rainey Harper](#) culminated in 1904 in the termination of Alice Dewey's appointment as principal of the Laboratory School. Both Deweys resigned, and John Dewey's friend [James M. Cattell](#) of Columbia University moved quickly to secure his services. In February 1905 Dewey assumed his duties as professor of philosophy with a joint appointment at Teachers College, Columbia's college of education. Dewey held these positions until 1930 when he was appointed Professor Emeritus of Philosophy in Residence at full salary.

Professional philosophy during Dewey's first decade at Columbia was embroiled in debates between realists, who generally held that things are as they are apart from knowing minds, and idealists, who believed that mind constitutes reality. Characteristically, Dewey's instrumentalism found a middle way. He argued that human organisms interact with the real facilities and constraints of lived environments and that they construct tools and artifacts of many types, including conceptual ones, in a continual modification and reconstitution of "reality." "Facts," Dewey argued, are neither the unconditioned entities of the realists nor the totally constituted ones of the idealists. They are instead always "the facts of a case"--the facts of and for an organism situated within an environment and continually adjusting to it by means of the production of new results. In these matters Dewey anticipated by some forty years the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Dewey's instrumentalism was further developed in *Ethics* (1908), written with [James H. Tufts](#), the first text on the subject to include discussions of current social problems, and *How We Think* (1910), an instant classic in educational literature. Dewey's concern for the transaction of an organism with its environment figured prominently throughout his life's work, forming a central theme even in his last major work, *Knowing and the Known* (1949), a collaboration with [Arthur F. Bentley](#).

Dewey's ground breaking work and increasing influence resulted in his election to the presidency of the American Philosophical Association for 1905-1906 and the vice presidency of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1909. His political activities during this period included participation in the formation of teachers unions, in the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and in the woman suffrage movement.

Dewey reacted to the professional, national, and international stresses of the World War I years by intensifying his political activities. His support for U.S. intervention in the war as a means to the construction of a lasting peace precipitated a break with some of his most devoted disciples, including [Randolph S. Bourne](#). But his support for the war was coupled with a staunch defense of peaceful dissent and academic freedom. He was among the founders of the Teachers League of New York (1913), the American Association of University Professors (1915), and the American Civil Liberties Union (1920) and was a regular contributor to the *New Republic*.

During the war years Dewey developed his instrumentalism still further. In his *Essays in Experimental Logic* (1916), he characterized the acquisition of knowledge as a kind of technological activity analogous to production in more patently industrial spheres. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), he identified education with growth and the development of habits that allow the control of the environment for human purposes. As such, he argued, education has "no end beyond itself." While on leave from Columbia from 1918 to 1921, Dewey lectured first at the University of California and Stanford University, and then at the Imperial University in Tokyo and the national universities of Peking and Nanking. Back at Columbia he published *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in which he rejected the view of human nature as the expression of instinct and offered instead an analysis of human impulse, habit, and intelligence with a view to establishing the empirical and naturalistic basis for moral behavior. This work was well received, and in 1944 was reprinted in a paperback edition for use by military personnel.

Dewey delivered the first series of the Paul Carus Lectures in 1922. These became the basis for *Experience and Nature* (1925), widely regarded as his most important work. Although it

extended and refined his instrumentalism, it revealed that Dewey's emphasis had shifted from the biological and psychological factors of human life to the anthropological and historical. He also entered for the first time into a detailed treatment of aesthetic theory. Finally, in a move that puzzled many critics, he sought a reconstruction of metaphysics, which he treated as "a statement of the generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds, without regard to their differentiation into physical and mental," and as a "ground-map of the province of criticism."

Dewey's attention again turned to social and political matters during the next decade. He published essays in support of the socialist reforms he had witnessed in Mexico during the summer of 1926 when he had lectured at its national university. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), he deplored the disappearance of the "public" as a locus of discourse and the testing of ideas and argued that social inquiry must be reestablished on a scientific basis. His tireless professional activities continued despite Alice Dewey's death in 1927. In the summer of 1928 he visited schools in the Soviet Union as a part of an unofficial delegation of American educators. His generally favorable reports, published in the *New Republic*, included a call for his government's recognition of the Soviet Union; conservative factions responded by branding him a "communist."

In 1929 Dewey published *The Quest for Certainty*, in which he recast his instrumentalism in terms developed by physicist [Percy W. Bridgman](#) and others and known as "operationalism." Dewey argued that, whereas philosophy had traditionally aimed at attaining certainty, the real value of ideas is determined by their outcome, which is in turn based on continuing experimental tests. Some of the critics of this book accused Dewey of "scientism" or the view that science is the test of all experience. Despite such criticism, Dewey maintained a faith in the possibility that science and technology could ameliorate society. In *Individualism, Old and New* (1930), he argued that while rapid industrialization had alienated many men and women, technology properly embodied in social institutions could liberate personal energies and inspire jointly beneficial activities.

His attacks on dualistic thinking also continued, though in a different vein. During 1930 Dewey wrote that he was anxious to "get into a field I haven't treated systematically, and art & aesthetics has come to me." In *Art as Experience* (1934), an outgrowth of the William James Lectures he had given at Harvard University, he argued that in experience that is truly aesthetic means and ends cooperate. Where inquiry in the arts is successful, distinctions between "fine" arts and "useful" arts are obviated. The "work" of art involves not only the art object, but also its production and appreciation. Likewise, he maintained, the development of aesthetic appreciation is a kind of productive skill. Neo-Hegelian idealists applauded *Art as Experience*, and pragmatists professed shock at what both regarded as Dewey's return to idealism. Dewey, however, saw his work as a further development of his instrumentalism.

Dewey returned to his familiar theme in *A Common Faith* (1934), this time addressing the philosophy of religion. He argued that although the term "religion" refers at best to mutually contradictory cultural practices, the "religious" qualities of experience can nevertheless serve as a basis for a "common" faith that is able to cut across divisions of class, race, and sect and to take into account the demands of life in scientific-technological societies.

Liberalism and Social Action (1935) was in part a reply to [Reinhold Niebuhr](#), whose *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) had attacked Dewey for placing too much faith in scientific technology to reform society. Niebuhr had argued that reform would take place only through social conflict based on the "absolutizing moral principle" he termed Christian love, whose primary tools would be potent dogmas and popular oversimplifications. In his response, Dewey traced the history of liberalism from the seventeenth century and issued a call for its radical reform. The requisite liberalism, he argued, would overhaul outmoded institutions, reorganize common action, and apply the methods of science within the political sphere.

Although he demonstrated his deep concern for the plight of scholars who were fleeing fascism by participating in the formation of a "University-in-Exile" under the sponsorship of the New School for Social Research, Dewey nevertheless opposed U.S. intervention in the worsening problems in Europe and Asia. In 1937 Dewey served as chair of a commission to examine the charges brought against Leon Trotsky during the "Moscow Trials" of 1936-1937. Despite his advanced age he traveled to Mexico City, where Trotsky was living in exile, to chair a series of hearings. After numerous interviews with Trotsky and a lengthy examination of the evidence, the commission declared Trotsky not guilty of the charges brought against him in Moscow. Dewey's role in the work of the commission led U.S. communists to denounce him as a "fascist." Despite his opposition to U.S. intervention in Europe in the 1930s, on the home front Dewey actively opposed attempts by conservative organizations to limit academic freedom and to require teachers to take loyalty oaths. He also disapproved of religious instruction in the public schools.

Dewey continued to refine his version of the pragmatic theory of truth and the logical basis of his instrumentalism. In 1938 he published one of his least understood works, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Despite the increasing popularity of a formal approach to the subject, with its reliance on atomistic propositions with definable truth values, Dewey argued that such an approach to inquiry fails to reflect the richness of experience. Truth, he argued, is much more complex than a matter of the correspondence between statement and fact; it is "warranted assertibility."

Among Dewey's publications during 1939, *Theory of Valuation* and *Freedom and Culture* reflect his continuing interest in social criticism. The events following Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939 caused Dewey to abandon his earlier advocacy of neutrality, in which he had warned of the growing influence of a "semi-military, semi-financial autocracy." He supported the Lend-Lease Bill in 1940 and America's entry into the war in December 1941. With [Sidney Hook](#) and others, Dewey formed in 1939 the Committee for Cultural Freedom, whose purpose was to "expose the repression of intellectual freedom." Because the committee condemned practices in the Soviet Union, as well as in Germany, Italy, Japan and Spain, Dewey once again became the target of communists. As the chair of the committee, Dewey supported Bertrand Russell when his appointment at the College of the City of New York was rescinded in 1940 on the grounds that Russell was an atheist and immoral.

In 1939 Dewey retired from Columbia, but his social activism did not diminish. He responded with vigor to the attacks on his educational theory advanced by advocates of a traditionalist "great books" approach led by [Robert M. Hutchins](#) and [Mortimer Adler](#). He also opposed what he regarded as attempts by President [Nicholas Murray Butler](#) of Columbia to curb academic freedom during the war. Concerned about America's official praise of the Soviet Union, Dewey

warned against the dangers of an uncritical acceptance of Joseph Stalin's repression. After the war, however, he opposed barring members of the Communist party from teaching in universities, and he deplored the "hysterical" activities of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

In 1946 Dewey married Roberta Lowitz Grant, forty-two, the widow of Robert Grant, an engineer. Dewey had known her parents since the early years of the century when her father was a teacher. The couple adopted two young children. The occasion of Dewey's ninetieth birthday in 1949 was widely celebrated in the press, by numerous academic conferences that took his work as their theme, and by formal celebrations in New York City and Burlington, Vermont. During the last years of his life Dewey continued his long practice of regular correspondence, especially with his collaborator, Arthur Bentley. He also began work on a new edition of *Experience and Nature*.

Dewey died at his home in New York City. An urn containing his ashes was interred in a memorial monument at the University of Vermont. The event was commemorated on 26 October 1972. In 1968 the U.S. Post Office issued a thirty-cent stamp bearing Dewey's likeness, and in 1971 Grenada honored him with a five-cent stamp. In November 1991 astronaut Story Musgrave honored Dewey by taking a copy of *Experience and Education* with him into space.

Dewey's influence on American life can scarcely be underestimated. During his lifetime he was America's leading educational theorist, and his work continues to be a source of insight for reformers in that field. His social and political ideas, especially his radical conception of democracy, continue to be assaulted from both the right and the left. Together with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger, Dewey is widely regarded as one of the three most innovative philosophers of the twentieth century. He was loved, honored, vilified, and attacked as perhaps no other major philosopher in American history. Although he was the recipient of scores of honors and awards, perhaps the most appropriate one was bestowed on him during the 1930s, when he became widely known as "America's Philosopher."

Bibliography

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