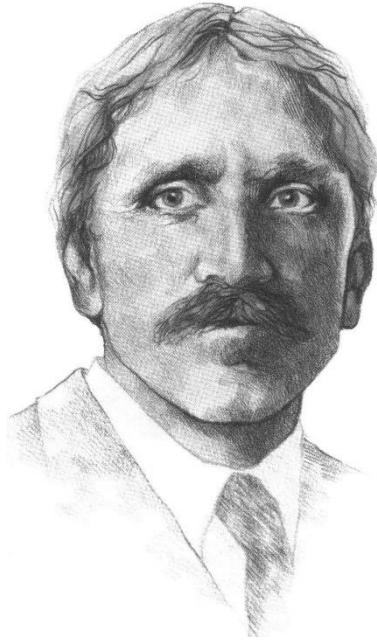


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The Vast Emergence: John Dewey

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Have we really moved into the dawn of a new age?

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That was the prevailing question throughout the Western world at the opening of the twentieth century. As the nineteenth century rolled into the twentieth, there was an all but universal sense that a new wideness, wonder, breadth of vision, and abundance of opportunities had come upon the world. All of civilization appeared to be blossoming into a fullness of flower that would make the past seem like the dark ages and the future filled with dimensions of thinking and living unanticipated by even the most happy optimists. Few of us who inhabit the years at the close of the twentieth century can sense the euphoria our forebears felt when they contemplated the future in the nascent years of “this fabulous century.”

The attitude that characterized the culture of the time grew out of many streams of influence that were thought genuine and world-changing by both the thinkers and the common citizens of the West in that day—and there was some accuracy in their assessment. The streams of influence they observed were significant and world-changing. But few of those influences changed the course of history in exactly the way those living at the time thought they would.

The influences were many. During the nineteenth century, the West was moving from feudalistic attitudes and practices to the great change of culture even then called the Industrial Revolution. The steam engine, the horseless carriage, mechanized farm machinery, and machines to make machines—all seemed to be filled with bright promise. Already mechanical means had been developed that would reduce what had once been the backbreaking labor of a thousand to moderate effort of a single man operating a machine. Observing this, even the most uninspired saw in the future a day when leisure would replace labor, when contemplation would be the activity of man while the machines did the work.

That hope for an easier future made it possible for the citizens of the day to ignore the sweatshops of the major cities and other exploitations of labor that soon became common.

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Idealism was in vogue, and the unfortunate circumstances endured by laborers were seen as merely temporary conditions on the way to the wonderful world of the future. One of the functions of hope is to create patience, and that was the case in this instance. Hope became one of the great themes promoted by those who lived at the expense of the patience of the people they exploited.

The euphoria of the times also grew out of the fact that they were generally peaceful days. The horrors of the Civil War—which had brought about the most extensive carnage in the history of the world up to that time—were put out of mind. This still inadequately explained event was remembered largely in terms of heroism and as a great stimulant to the Industrial Revolution.

Anyone who contemplates history cannot help but notice how the gift of blessed forgetfulness is given to virtually every generation in the unrolling years of history. This gift makes it possible for a given age in the midst of its blithe optimism to repeat the fatal mistakes of a previous generation with hardly a pang of remorse or fear. So it is that successive cultures have marched to the beat of fife or drum into the red cauldron of war, pain, and death and did so by following exactly the well-worn path trod by previous young aspirants to glory.

Especially, however, the world at the turn of the twentieth century was filled with anticipation. That was because of the philosophies that had become popular. The early 1900s was the first era in which Darwin and his ideas had come to full flower. By that time, evolution was well on its way to capturing the world of academia and the thought processes of the average man. Virtually everyone believed that history was moving up from the gross and the animalistic into the sublime and even the angelic. Each individual could reasonably argue that “natural selection has selected *me!*” The natural man could think of himself as being the person on whose shoulder history had laid its hand of destiny, calling him to be a custodian of the future.

Social Darwinism was fast persuading society of a similar conviction. It claimed that no problem was unsolvable, no difficulty unresolvable. Given time enough, all would be well. Humanity had within it a potential that would not be denied. Let the naysayers and the pessimists be left behind, for nature itself had dictated progress and fulfillment, writing it large upon the bright scrolls of the future.

Of no small consequence to the development of the spirit of the times was the fact that the Christian religion, despoiled of its corrective theology, was inadequate to stem the tide of humanism. In those days, the strong and forceful preaching of the cardinal Christian doctrine of original sin would have done much. But, alas, as we have seen, Christianity had abdicated its responsibility to be a corrective within society and instead

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cooperated with the golden promises of the secular humanists. Moving with the tide, the church quickly changed its message of salvation through the cleansing of the blood of Christ to a message of salvation through the improvement of the social structure. Christian leaders and the great denominations saw the attitude of optimism not as a danger to society but as a godsend. The world had “finally come around to our point of view” and was thinking of human possibilities. If man is no longer a sinner, all he needs is education and inspiration, and the flame of bright possibility will burn brilliantly in all society.

That attitude on the part of the religious establishment is perhaps understandable. Although there had been significant revivals of religion in the immediate past, at the turn of the century, those revivals were not generally characterized by intellectual or theological content. Many people indeed were brought to the place where they confessed Christ, but they were brought to that place by simple preachers with a simple gospel for the common people. Out of the era immediately preceding the turn of the century there came earnest faith but not a broadly understood Christian view of God and the world. The ranks of the common people came to the point of conversion, but few were the influences of those revivals on the world of academia.

Consequently, to this day the great missing element in Western thinking is the Christian viewpoint. Western man thinks about economics, politics, government, education, and a thousand other things without ever once asking, *What has God said about these things?* The absence of the forceful pressing of that question turned the early promise of the twentieth century into the greatest series of disasters the world has ever known. It brought upon the world the greatest intellectual confusion, moral myopia, and carnage that has been seen in the history of man. We hardly need to be reminded that science without God, so vaunted in that day, can now put on one airplane more explosive power than has been expended in all of the wars in the history of mankind.

Let us also remind ourselves that the ideas of Karl Marx were gaining currency at the turn of the century. In the very wind was the promise of new philosophies, new thinking, new futures, and perhaps even an entirely new social structure to contain it all. Very quickly these ideas took hold in the West, American culture included, and then spread throughout the whole world.

How was this set of ideas able to gain so much credibility so easily? In earlier eras, emergent concepts took a long time to gain ascendancy. How was it that liberalism, humanism, and the new fluid way of thinking was able to move so far so soon? The answer will be startling to some:

These new ideas captured the American educational system.

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Put another way, the complex set of new ideas, thoughts, notions, philosophies, and ways of thinking moved into what was then the world's greatest instrument for the dissemination of ideas, the public school system of America.

How did that happen?

As always, of course, there were multiple causes. However, one particular individual, an educator, was more than anyone else responsible for the transformation of the methods and the content of education in America.

His name was John Dewey.

This man, described by biographers and commentators as “America’s foremost philosopher and educator,” refashioned the educational system in America, moving it from the so-called static concepts of the past into a wholly new era in education. In the process, he redefined almost everything—from the nature of truth to the responsibilities of the teacher and the capacity of the human personality. His influence became pervasive in America and had an effect as well on the way students in most other nations were educated.

The influence of the man and his ideas extended through a fifty-year period during which he exercised his capacities as an organizer, prolific writer, and seminal thinker. He became a primary influence in the world of thought. That the “new thinking” at the turn of the twentieth century became “the way the world thinks” can be laid at the feet of this man who more than all others made education in America what it is today.

In the sense of history, the facts of this man’s life are relatively unexciting. He did not appear as a Promethean personality, he did not fight in a great war, and he held no high political office. But, alas, he was a notable contender in the battle that matters—the battle of ideas. He was one of the prime movers in the struggle for the minds of men.

In this regard, we must remind ourselves that the essential battle of the world is exactly that, a battle for the minds of men. The struggles that matter today and tomorrow are not fought with submarines, bombers, missiles, and moving armies. Those machines of visible conflict are but the final *reductio ad absurdum* of the unseen conflicts brewed earlier in the imaginations of people that later boiled up into external, empirical reality. Millions who have perished in the nameless battles of history and who are now buried in unmarked graves died because someone failed at intellectual and moral persuasion.

The opening salvos of any war are the public announcement that the earlier spiritual, intellectual, and mental battle has been lost. John Dewey was one of history’s chief

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contenders in that earlier, vital battle—the battle for the mind. But, alas, he was on the wrong side of that battle.

Dewey was born in 1859 in Burlington, Vermont. From his earliest youth, he was a bookish individual, a shy young man never thought of as being a brilliant student. He enrolled in the University of Vermont in 1875. As a college student he had no clear idea as to what he would pursue as a career, though during the final years of his university experience he became interested in philosophy, with a special turn toward social thought. From the very beginning of his philosophical thinking, he did not conceive of philosophy from a classical point of view. As it is normally taught, philosophy deals with the great questions of life and then teaches that an answer to those questions is embraced by one school of thought or another. For Dewey, however, philosophy was not to be so simply categorized. Rather, he saw man as living in the midst of a swirling set of ideas, issues, concerns, and problems, which set was ever changing. Those problems needed, therefore, to be considered, categorized, and then constantly reconsidered in the light of ever new, ever changing developments. Nothing must be thought of as final, settled, certainly not as foundational.

In his university experience Dewey discovered Hegel. The influence of Hegel on Dewey was initially in the area of idealism. It is interesting to note that Hegel was a profound influence upon many who were later to follow him philosophically, including Marx, Kierkegaard, and others who were to become influential in a later age. Hegel is not to be discounted as one of the prime movers of Western thought.

Dewey later testified that Hegel satisfied an intellectual craving. Dewey derived from Hegel a sense of the ideal and also the view that reality was not a fixed, hard, foundational, never-to-be-changed thing. Dewey came to see reality as change, emergence, and development, rather than as a static and fixed thing that is foundational and unalterable.

One of the most obvious characteristics of Dewey's philosophy—and one that makes him difficult to read—is the fluid nature of his views. More than often, Dewey discomfited his intellectual opponents by denying a given proposition and then refusing to affirm the opposite of that proposition, denying that as well. For Dewey, reality was something in between, but was not even permanently that. So again, truth was not to be found in static propositions but in the confirming reality of social fulfillment.

As a consequence, it has been difficult for normal Aristotilian thinkers to finally categorize John Dewey and his views. He was a philosopher but not the father of any philosophic school of thought. He was an educator but not one who saw education as the communication of some kind of final truth. He was an educational administrator but one

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who kept his eye persistently on outcomes rather than mechanics. Consequently, words such as *provisional*, *experiment*, and *unpredictability* are often applied to his thinking and his methods. The frustration of attempting to categorize Dewey is compounded by the fact that in the large number of books, essays, and magazines he wrote over the course of his life he dealt with topics in such a fashion that he could be quoted on either side of most of the current arguments. For him, nothing was constant, given, or finally true, but rather all things were pragmatic, adaptable, and subject to whatever reinterpretation seemed appropriate for the day and the hour.

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The early John Dewey was certainly involved in specifics as he taught classics, science, and algebra on a high school level in Oil City, Pennsylvania, from 1879 to 1881 before returning to Vermont, where he continued to teach. Dewey then applied to the graduate program at Johns Hopkins University. Interestingly, he was refused the aid of a fellowship and was therefore constrained to borrow five hundred dollars from an aunt to begin his career as a professional teacher and philosopher. The university soon became one of the most exciting centers of scholarly and intellectual activity, and Dewey was an active participant in it all. He took the doctorate at Johns Hopkins in 1884, presenting as his thesis a dissertation on the psychology of Immanuel Kant.

That same year, at the urging of one of his former professors, George Sylvester Morris, an exponent of neo-Hegelianism, Dewey assumed a professorship at the University of Michigan. At Michigan Dewey became increasingly dissatisfied with speculative philosophy and tried to make philosophy applicable and directly relevant to the practical affairs of men. There also his economic, political, and social views became increasingly radical. His first book, *Psychology*, was followed by *Applied Psychology* in 1889.

In 1894, he moved to Illinois and became chairman of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology, and Education at the University of Chicago. His experience at the University of Chicago gave him the opportunity to consolidate his diverse interests in psychological, social, and intellectual matters. He took part in social welfare activities to a high degree, participating in the life of Hull House in Chicago, founded by Jane Addams. There he involved himself in the economic and social problems of a major urban area, interacting with the population at every level and further strengthening his conviction that philosophy must be applied to life. Also, he founded the Laboratory School, which then became known as The Dewey School, and wrote a number of important books on education, among them *The School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum*.

As a result of his work in Chicago, he was invited in 1904 to assume the chair of education at Columbia University in New York. From this position of influence, he labored until his retirement in 1930, gaining international prominence for his radical views in education and philosophy. The Columbia Teachers' College soon became a training center for

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teachers from around the world, thereby spreading Dewey's educational philosophy literally to the ends of the earth.

Dewey was instrumental in founding *The Journal of Philosophy*, which became an international forum for the discussion of his ideas. From the time of its founding until Dewey's death, scarcely a volume of this journal did not contain an article either written by Dewey himself or containing a discussion of the details of his philosophy.

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New York was then as now the journalistic and media center of the nation. This gave Dewey the opportunity to press his political and social views in the magazines and related publications that came from that important nerve center. He regularly wrote for such magazines as *The New Republic* and began to travel and lecture, thereby extending his influence in many places.

He lectured in Tokyo, Peking, and Nanking from 1919 to 1921 and advocated his doctrines in *Reconstruction and Philosophy*, written in 1920 and based on a series of lectures he had presented at the Imperial University of Japan. His lecture travels also took him to Turkey, Russia, and Mexico, where at many an educational center he advanced his ideas, which were considered a part of the radical ethos of the time.

So extensive were his writings over his lifetime that M. H. Thomas's bibliography of Dewey's works is more than 150 pages long. So diverse were Dewey's writings that his influence made a high impact not only in the field of education but also in virtually every other field that was a subject of intellectual inquiry. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says:

The wide effects of his teaching did not depend upon the superficial aspects of its presentation, for Dewey was not a brilliant lecturer or essayist, although he could be extremely eloquent. His writings are frequently turgid, obscure, and lacking in stylistic brilliance. But more than any other American of his time, Dewey expressed the deepest hopes and aspirations of his fellow man. Whether dealing with a technical philosophical issue or some concrete injustice, he displayed a rare combination of acuteness, good sense, imagination, and wit.¹

So it was that as the consequence of his persistent presentation of his ideas on the lecture circuit and in printed page, Dewey was soon thought of as the man of all knowledge, the supreme intellect who could give us guidance on the subjects relevant to the modern mind. For years Dewey was the most respected educator in the world, a reputation he sustained through the unceasing output of his ideas presented to an admiring world via the printed page.

¹ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan; Free Press: 1967), p. 381.

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How shall we understand John Dewey?

The best way to do that is to note what the man himself said about the subjects and issues that are relevant to us. Although it is true that many have despaired of truly understanding Dewey's many-faceted mind, Dewey presented some of his ideas quite candidly. He revealed, for instance, his lack of confidence in eternal truth. The highest word he used for that concept was the word *philosophy*. He said: "As for myself, then, the discussion is approached with the antecedent idea that philosophy, like politics, literature, and the plastic arts, is itself a phenomenon of human culture. Its connection with social history, with civilization is intrinsic.... Philosophers are a part of history, caught in its movement; creators perhaps in some measure of its future, but also assuredly creatures of its past."²

In this fashion, Dewey again and again neglects or refuses to admit that there is a final, unchangeable truth in the form of God and His Word. "Meaning is wider in scope as well as more precious in value than is truth, and philosophy is occupied with meaning rather than with truth."³

Then he hedged just a bit but restated the same conviction, saying:

Making such a statement is dangerous; it is easily misconceived to signify the truth is of no great importance under any circumstances; while the fact is that the truth is so infinitely important when it is important at all, namely, in records of events and descriptions of existences, that we extend its claims to regions where it has no justification. But even as respects truths, meaning is the wider category; truths are but one class of meanings, namely, those in which a claim to verifiability by their consequences is an intrinsic part of their meaning.⁴

Although much can be said about this statement, it is quintessential Deweyian logic to suggest that the verifiability in truth resides in consequences.

That is why Dewey is commonly called an instrumentalist. To him education and all other activities are to be evaluated not by their truth content (for what is that?) but rather by their consequences in the experience of the recipient of that education. So it is that Dewey cryptically said, "The ultimate problem of production is the production of human beings."

² Joseph Ratner, *John Dewey's Philosophy* (New York: Modern Library, 1939), pp. 245–46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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Dewey resented any tendency to produce final formulations of truth in the form he described as *dogma*, a word he used frequently.

A great tragedy of the present situation may turn out to be that those most conscious of present evils and of the need of a thorough-going change in the socio-economic system will trust to some short-cut way out, like the method of civil war and violence. Instead of relying upon the constant application of all socially available resources of knowledge and continuous inquiry, they may rely upon the frozen intelligence of some past thinker, sect and party cult, frozen because arrested into a dogma.

That “intelligence,” when frozen in dogmatic social philosophies, themselves the fruit of arrested philosophies of history, generates a vicious circle of blind oscillation, as tragically exemplified by the present state of the world.⁵

What then is the answer to the present state of the world?

But an immense difference divides the *planned* society from a *continuously planning society*. The former requires fixed blueprints imposed from above and therefore involving reliance upon physical and psychological force to secure conformity to them. The latter means the release of intelligence through the widest form of cooperative give-and-take. The attempt to *plan* social organization and association without the freest possible play of intelligence contradicts the very idea of *social planning*. For the latter is an operative method of activity, not a predetermined set of final “truths.”⁶ (Italics his)

When one considers Dewey, he must face the fact that the absence of a concept of final truth left behind Dewey a trail of ambiguity. In fact, Dewey himself said, “Although I have raised large questions, it is not my ambition to answer them.”⁷ Consistent with this confession, the world came away from its association with Dewey with that same impression. Writing on many subjects, he raised questions of many kinds. The concrete answers to those questions were frustratingly absent. The analysts of this man certainly must have felt that Dewey was a question-raiser rather than an answer-giver.

Nevertheless, Dewey continued to speak—endlessly it seems—about what must be done in every area of life, particularly the educational system. His attitude toward the moving wave of education was well expressed: “The educational system must move one way or another, either backward to the intellectual and moral standards of a pre-scientific age or

⁵ Ibid., p. 431.

⁶ Ibid., p. 432.

⁷ Ibid., p. 488.

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forward to ever greater utilization of scientific method in the development of the possibilities of growing, expanding experience. I have but endeavored to point out some of the conditions which must be satisfactorily fulfilled if education takes the latter course.”⁸ Of course, Dewey’s vote was for the latter course. He loved to contrast the prescientific age and the present age of the scientific method. As to the latter, he enjoyed applying to it such words as *possibilities*, *growing*, *expanding*, and especially *experience*. In fact, if it were necessary to describe Dewey’s educational philosophy in a single word, that word would be the word *experience*. His methodology for the fulfillment of the philosophy of education he espoused is frequently called “the experimental method.”

Dewey’s position was that the educational system of his day was inadequate, a failure, and needed to be revamped. “It is time to take stock and to consider why and how the existing educational system has failed to meet the needs of the present and the imminent future.”⁹ His answer was typical as well.

Part of the reason is found in the educational tradition itself. Elementary schooling was everywhere in the past devoted to the promotion of literacy. It was identified with acquiring skill in reading, writing, and figuring. Our ancestors would have been possessed of uncanny insight and imagination if they had thought of the purpose of the common school in any other than traditional terms. Higher education was almost equally controlled by concern for symbols, namely, advanced mathematics and foreign languages.¹⁰

We may here gain an insight into an attitude of Dewey that has certainly influenced modern education. In time past, foreign languages and advanced mathematics were indeed considered the core of education. They came close to being thought of as absolute knowledge, contact with which would equip the student to deal effectively with the knowledge that would come to him subsequently in the educational process. Schools were expected to present the facts to the students and then show respect for the conclusions the students drew from those facts. Dewey, on the other hand, appeared to be disposed toward moving quickly to the conclusions apart from the facts, in the sense of data having been built into the mind of the student. More and more attention was placed on making the student adept at participation in the democratic process as opposed to making him conversant with “three R’s.”

He was further critical of the past and its traditional teaching methods: “The traditional notion of ‘discipline’ was developed under these circumstances. The little red

⁸ Ibid., p. 681.

⁹ Ibid., p. 683.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 684.

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schoolhouse of our ancestors was a struggle of wits and often of mean strength between pupils and teachers."¹¹

He declared: "There is only one way out of the existing educational confusion and drift. That way is the definite substitution of a social purpose, controlling methods of teaching and discipline and materials of study, for the traditional individualistic aim."¹²

He therefore declared: "Schools do have a role—and an important one—in *production* of social change"¹³ (italics his). He declared that change was a constant in society and that anyone who did not recognize this point was under "a self-imposed hallucination." Therefore, educational methodology and content must change—constantly—to keep up with the constant and usually unpredictable flow of social attitudes. He was critical of those who "as a rule opposed the studies called modern and the methods called progressive."¹⁴

What was the attitude of John Dewey toward religion? He gave us a revealing look at the measure of his soul in this regard, observing that

science has the same spiritual import as supernaturalism; that democracy translates into the same religious attitude as did feudalism; that it is only a matter of slight changes of phraseology, a development of old symbolisms into new shades of meaning—such beliefs testify to that torpor of imagination which is the uniform effect of dogmatic belief. The reconstruction of the Church is a matter which concerns, indeed, the whole community so far as its outcome is concerned; while the responsibility for its initiation belongs primarily to those within the churches. The burden of conducting the development, the reconstruction, of other educational agencies belongs, however, primarily to the community as a whole. With respect to this intellectual aspect, its philosophy, it belongs especially to those who, having become conscious in some degree of the modern ideas of nature, of man and society, are best able to forecast the direction which social changes are taking. It is lucidity, sincerity, and the sense of reality which demand that, until the non-supernatural view is more completely elaborated in all its implications and is more completely in possession of the machinery of education, the schools shall keep hands off and shall do as little as possible.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 689.

¹² Ibid., p. 688.

¹³ Ibid., p. 692.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 693.

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We need, however, to accept the responsibilities of living in an age marked by the greatest intellectual readjustment history records.¹⁵

What can Dewey mean except that he rejoices in “the greatest intellectual readjustment history records,” a readjustment in which society and education moved from the supernatural to the nonsupernatural?

Dewey sounds for all the world as though he was advocating a crusade to foster the movement of culture in that nonsupernatural direction. “Bearing the losses and inconveniences of our time as best we may, it is the part of men to labor persistently and patiently for the clarification and development of the positive creed of life implicit in democracy and in science, and to work for the transformation of all practical instrumentalities of education until they are in harmony with these ideas.”¹⁶ In this call to arms, Dewey came close to calling the presence of religion a “social faction.”¹⁷

But we cannot help but include a further statement by Dewey that will be helpful in our understanding of his attitude toward religion. He spoke quite categorically, saying:

But of one thing I am quite sure: our ordinary opinions about the rise and falling off of religion are highly conventional, based mostly upon the acceptance of a standard of religion which is the product of just those things in historic religions which are ceasing to be credible. So far as education is concerned, those who believe in religion as a natural expression of human experience must devote themselves to the development of the ideas of life which lie implicit and are still new science and are still newer democracy. They must interest themselves in the transformation of those institutions which still bear the dogmatic and the feudal stamp (and which do not?) till they are in accord with these ideas. In performing this service, it is their business to do what they can to prevent all public educational agencies from being employed in ways which inevitably impede the recognition of the spiritual import of science and democracy, and hence of the type of religion which will be the fine flower of the modern spirit's achievement.¹⁸

Here we have quintessential liberalism. The religion that must be fostered is the spiritual import of science and democracy. That is the religion that will produce the fine flower of the modern spirit's achievement.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 705.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 706.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 707.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 715.

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We can see, therefore, that Dewey was near utopian in his attitude about the progress of history. He believed that the best way progress could be achieved was by influencing the content of education in that direction. He was convinced as well that he himself occupied the best pulpit in the world from which to preach the message of progress and its great promise for the future.

This being the case, we do well to attempt a summary of the ideas of Dewey, which will help in our evaluation of the nature of his influence.

1. *Final truth is illusory.* We live in a world that is ever changing, and therefore what we think of as principles are inevitably subject to alteration on a constant basis. Nothing is *planned*, but everything is *being planned*. Life is essentially process, and the only constant of which we can be sure is the constancy of change.

In this cardinal principle of his, Dewey stood against the epistemologists of the past who held to any concept of eternal truth. However, Dewey would not resist them but rather would simply suggest that their point of view should be respected but not become transcendent. In all of this, Dewey denied what C. S. Lewis called “the doctrine of objective value.” Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, argued that when we deny the doctrine of objective value, we must as an inevitable result finally produce the destruction of humanity.

Dewey even sounds at times as if he believes that all reality is within the mind of the observer. Beauty is simply in the eye of the beholder. Nothing, therefore, is objectively true or valuable, but it is only so as it intersects some human concern.

Even while thinking of these things, we must not forget that the mind of man is teleologically oriented and must have purpose and reason. It cannot live with the endless pursuit of ever-changing values without ever coming to final conclusions. We must not doubt, therefore, that Deweyian thinking could be one of the reasons for the strange bewilderments, indeed the insanities, that have come upon our time. It is often said of Dewey’s philosophy that it begins with people and ends with people—a conclusion that pleased Dewey. The trouble is, beginning and ending with people is circular thinking nowhere anchored in final truth.

2. *We must not think of truth but must concern ourselves with meaning.* Truth is a boxy, dogmatic thing with hard corners and offenses attached to it by the dogmatists. Meaning, therefore, is the thing because it is “the facts” interacting with the tide of the moment.

Such a line of thought gives the reader of Dewey intellectual vertigo, for *meaning* is an ambiguous and arbitrary concept lacking the universality of *truth*. Effective

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communication slips away when a word or concept can only be defined in terms of “what it *means* to you” and “what it *means* to me.”

Now it is likely that in his classroom experience Dewey enjoyed the discussions precipitated by his ideas. Similarly, in interacting with the larger world he could only have been delighted with the endless consternation his ambiguities produced in the minds of his readers. Teachers and students everywhere read the writings of “the great man,” who was reputed to have the most spacious mind in the world. Many professed to understand him, but of course, they were instantly in an argument with other persons who also professed to understand him but who had come to completely opposite conclusions regarding his ideas. The word *meaning* may sound like a sublime way to define truth, but actually it is another way to settle in, to bring upon ourselves the fog of misunderstanding and incomprehension.

3. *Truth is resident in experience.* The truth of simple syllogisms that are contemplated by the mind but unrealized in experience is to be denied. Experience, sparked by interest-creating teachers and rewarded by a sense of realization, is what education is all about.

Dewey, therefore, inveighed against the lecture method, whereby the mind of the teacher simply communicates with the mind of the student. Dewey regarded the lecture method as an inferior method of teaching. To him, truth does not consist in words, propositions, or assertions that can be communicated by language alone. Rather, he held that we cannot claim to understand anything until we have experienced it.

With this view of the ontological nature of experience Dewey opened the door to the subversion of every field of life—including religion—by existentialism. Over the years, the spirit of the age, influenced by the doctrine that truth is experience, has come more and more to entertain notions that would have been thought absurd in the past. How soon under the influence of the emotionalists, therefore, did society decide that happiness, fulfillment, the thrill, even the anticipation were more to be desired than uncolorful prepositional dogma?

The doctrine that truth is equivalent to experience raises a number of questions. What kind of experience? one might ask. Do not experiences differ with each person, with each situation, with each state of mind, and with the same person, depending on his variant moods? In truth, valid experience is so varied so as to lead to the conclusion that experience, in any practical sense, cannot be defined at all. The cessation of straight thinking and the beginning of emotional questing takes place when the doctrine takes hold that “truth equals experience.” Have we not, in fact, come to live in the most unsettled, the most questing world that ever has been?

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4. *Teaching fundamentally depends upon experiment.* The teacher must not think of himself or herself as possessing the final methodology, and of course, not the final truth. "Give it a try and see what happens" is the motto of the day.

Now there is a grain of truth in an idea such as this. In the sciences, experiments are set up precisely to detect and evaluate the outcome of a given new combination of elements. Scientists themselves admit that science is hardly the exact thing its popular reputation would have it be.

The dangerous element in Dewey's experimentalism is that he was experimenting on human beings. The educational system he produced is a cocoon your children and mine attend in order to be the object of testing emergent educational ideas and new "studies" in this and that. It has ceased to be a place children attend to learn objective truths so that in turn they can think and act wisely and responsibly tomorrow. To Dewey, we can only discover what is the truth for today and the experiment that will be attempted tomorrow.

There are grave consequences to this view that reach down to our time. The schools of our land have, to a significant degree, become laboratories where social theories, scientific views, and educational hypotheses are tested in the lives of our young people.

This has been the case in many ways. One illustration that comes to mind is busing. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent transporting young people at great cost from one end of a city (and county) to another. All of this in order to achieve some arbitrary percentage of young people of one and another race in a given school, which percentage came down by fiat from a sociologist somewhere. In this exercise schools are not being thought of as educational institutions at all. Rather they are being thought of as places in which to test someone's theory as to the best way to change attitudes, outlooks, convictions, prejudices, and the like. Though the experiment is fascinating to the sociological dilettante, it is not a stimulant to education.

5. *The "idea of God" has meaning to those who believe. Religion, however, must be reformed to serve mankind.* All must be instrumentalized for the sake of democracy and freedom. We must stay with a generalized meaning of the idea of God so that that generalization can take a needed shape at a given time. The idea of God is a serviceable doctrine that can be applied to one situation or another, provided it does not get too specific.

When speaking about any form of religion, Dewey again and again inveighed against religion's hardening itself into dogma. Being dogmatic about anything was anathema to Dewey. Especially was this true with regard to anything having to do with religion. Now Dewey was not unsympathetic to the teaching of religion, even Christianity, in the schools. But when he was asked the question, "What Christianity?" he decried the fact

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that Christianity had taken the form of various dogmas embraced by the denominations and was therefore no longer the generalized religion that could properly and profitably be presented to students in the public schools.

Dewey's generalized idea about religion, however, is most interesting. To Dewey, God as a unifying force between the ideal and the actual was the kind of supernaturalism that really mattered. He said:

What one person and one group accomplish becomes the standing ground and the starting point of those who succeed them. When the vital factors in this natural process are generally acknowledged in emotion, thought, and action, the process will be both accelerated and purified through elimination of that irrelevant element that culminates in the idea of the supernatural. When the vital factors attain the religious force that has been drafted into supernatural religions, the resulting reenforcement will be incalculable.

These considerations may be applied to the idea of God, or, to avoid misleading conceptions, to the idea of the divine. The idea is, as I have said, one of ideal possibilities unified through imaginative realization and projection. But this idea of God, or of the divine, is also connected with all the natural forces and conditions—including man and human association—that promote the growth of the ideal and that further its realization.... In this active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name "God," I would not insist that the name must be given. There are those who hold that the associations of the term with the supernatural are so numerous and close that any use of the word "God" is sure to give rise to misconception and be taken as a concession to traditional ideas.

In a distracted age, the need for such an idea is urgent. It can unify interests and energies now dispersed; it can direct action and generate the heat of emotion and the light of intelligence. Whether one gives the name "God" to this union, operative in thought and action, is a matter for individual decision. But the function of such a working union of the ideal and actual seems to mean to be identical with the force that has in fact been attached to the conception of God in all of the religions that have a spiritual content; and a clear idea of that function seems to me urgently needed at this present time.¹⁹

The perpetrators of the New Age movement would utter a hearty "amen" to such views.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 710.

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This, then, is a brief look at the complex man who was John Dewey. He was a positivist in nearly every respect—except in the case of dogmatic religion, such as fundamentalism—and therefore could find a place in his cosmology for most of the current ideas, especially those that were new or emergent. He presided over what could best be called “the vast emergence” of ideas that broke upon the twentieth century like a flood and were soon to move into the conduits of the American educational system.

What has been the result of this tide of influence that, by way of the educational system of the West, found its way into American thought?

Consideration of this question has turned into one of the most animated discussions of our time and over the last fifty years has been the object of great affirmation and great consternation. A thousand books have been written concerning what education is, what its content should be, and where it appears to be taking us now. One of the most popular of the recent analyses of modern education goes under a title with a touch of finality: *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Alan Bloom. The subject and point of view of this perceptive study by a teacher/scholar is revealed in the subtitle of the book: *How Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Soul of Today's Students*.

Bloom contrasts the “old view” of education, which provided a fundamental basis of unity that moved above class, race, religion, and national origin and that was bathed in the light of natural rights, with what is taking place today, saying:

The recent education of openness has rejected all that. It pays no attention to natural rights or the historical origins of our regime, which are now thought to have been essentially flawed and regressive. It is progressive and forward-looking. It does not demand fundamental agreement or the abandonment of old or new beliefs in favor of the natural ones. It is open to all kinds of men, all kinds of life-styles, all ideologies. There is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything. But when there are no shared goals or visions of public good, is the social contract any longer possible?²⁰

Bloom then decries the deterioration of our schools, particularly as it applies to the solid content of education. Morals have faded and are now being replaced by a feeble attempt at creating “values.” The old concepts of honor, honesty, virtue, and other truths we once thought to be self-evident are fading fast. They are either left unreplaced or are being replaced by cheap imitations such as pragmatism or profit.

²⁰ Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 27.

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Bloom's somber view of American education is echoed by others whose writings have become virtually a tide of indignation against the failures of the American school system. In his book *Peril and Promise* newsman John Chancellor has this to say:

If the United States runs out of scientists and engineers by the turn of the century, who will replace them? Today's thirteen-year-olds? Hardly. The Department of Education in 1989 helped fund a study of the mathematics and science skills of thirteen-year-olds in several countries. The American children came in dead last, with lower scores than the Spanish, British, Irish, Canadian, and South Korean children. South Korean thirteen-year-olds were first. The comparison was devastating. South Korea is a developing country, nearly destroyed by war in the 1950's, with a population that was mainly poor farmers a few decades ago. The United States is an economic giant, but is suffering from a softening of the brain. The Council on Competitiveness estimates that sixty thousand mathematics and science teachers in our high schools are not fully qualified to do their jobs.²¹

As if that weren't enough, Chancellor reports:

In 1989, the Secretary of Education, Lauro F. Cavazos, reported that since 1985, American high school students had flat or declining scores on college entrance examinations and an unchanged dropout rate. One out of every four high school students does not finish school—close to one million young people. Another fourth—another million—who are graduated are functionally illiterate when they get their diplomas. Half the eighteen-year-olds in this country today have failed to master basic language, mathematics, and analytical skills. A million dropouts here, a million functional illiterates there, *every year*.²² (Italics his)

These attitudes by modern commentators must not be thought of as isolated prejudices by those who want to be disagreeable. Phyllis Schlafley reports that thousands of parents have been deeply offended by the experience of their children in public schools. In *Child Abuse in the Schools*, she reports on this disgust with the public school system, leading one to conclude that there is broad discontent with increasingly expensive and decreasingly productive American education.

This attitude toward the public schools is not actually a modern development. Perceptive individuals have seen the dangers of "progressive education" since the days of its introduction. The Greek scholar and theologian J. Gresham Machen, whose writings were the object of most profitable study by many of us in our seminary years, had much to say

²¹ John Chancellor, *Peril and Promise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 47.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

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also about public education. His views should not be ignored by this generation. In *Christianity and Liberalism* (a book everyone should read) Machen says:

When one considers what the public schools of America in many places already are—their materialism, their discouragement of any sustained intellectual effort, their encouragement of the dangerous pseudo-scientific fads of experimental psychology—one can only be appalled by the thought of a commonwealth in which there is no escape from such a soul-killing system. But the principle of such laws (the laws that require a public school education and that, at that time, were also being used to deny the formation of Christian schools) and their ultimate tendency are far worse than the immediate results. A public school system, in itself, is indeed of enormous benefit to the race. But it is of benefit only if it is kept healthy at every moment by the absolutely free possibility of the competition of private schools. A public-school system, if it means the providing of free education for those who desire it, is a noteworthy and beneficial achievement of modern times; but when once it becomes monopolistic it is the most perfect instrument of tyranny which has yet been devised. Freedom of thought in the Middle Ages was combatted by the Inquisition, but the modern method is far more effective. Place the lives of children in their formative years, despite the convictions of their parents, under the ultimate control of experts appointed by the State, force them to attend schools where the higher aspirations of humanity are crushed out, and where the mind is filled with the materialism of the day, and it is difficult to see how even the remnants of liberty can subsist. Such a tyranny, supported as it is by a perverse technique used as the instrument in destroying human souls, is certainly far more dangerous than the crude tyrannies of the past, which despite their weapons of fire and sword, permitted thought at least to be free.

The truth is that the materialistic paternalism of the present day, if allowed to go on unchecked, will rapidly make of America one huge “Main Street,” where spiritual adventure will be discouraged and democracy will be regarded as consisting in the reduction of all mankind to the proportions of the narrowest and least gifted of the citizens.²³

In this important book, Machen pours out his concern for the future of education in America and for freedom itself. Machen’s book was written in 1924. What would this man say if he were to observe the schools of present-day America and the thought life of its citizens?

²³ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 13–15.

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Our present time has brought a mounting set of concerns.

We are warned again and again of the amazing rise in the economic power of Japan and the mounting potential of Western Europe, along with the remarkable changes in other nations of the world. Virtually every analysis of the future, after speaking of the growing possibilities in Asia, on the continent, and even in the Soviet Union, refers to the decline of the United States and North America. We are indeed experiencing an increasing and staggering public and private debt, a precipitant rise in the rate of crime, a drug war (which we are losing), a rise in suicides, and a regular reminder of the awful onslaught of the AIDS epidemic. Along with these frightening statistics comes the report of the mounting cost of our school system and the declining results in the education and inspiration of our young people. The question emerges as to whether the next generation of young people will be adequate to the task of handling the growing and near unsolvable problems that are coming upon Western society.

The decline of the West—here is one of the obvious facts of life in these days. From whence comes the problem? Whose fault is it? The source may be found by first answering the question, What is the major influence upon our society, and wherein has that influence failed? The answer to the first part of that question is that the major influence upon the life of Americans in this century has been its well-developed, fully organized, expensively financed educational system. The opportunity for education from kindergarten to a graduate degree is more widely available in America than in any other nation on earth. Thousands of students from virtually every nation of the world come to the United States to avail themselves of the educational resources present here, particularly training in the sciences.

At the same time, education in the humanities has faltered. The teaching of philosophy, sociology, and history has enjoyed less and less popularity. Why is this the case? Could it be that these “soft subjects” have been progressively emptied of their educational and spiritual content?

It is in the study of philosophy that the questions of final authority are considered. In medicine, the final authority is the simple issue of life and death (with a recent addition of financial capability). In science, the absolute is the speed of light, and this has now moved beyond discussion. In philosophy, however, final authority has been lost, with devastating results.

In the past in philosophy, whatever conclusions the philosopher reached, he had to begin with some doctrine of objective value. The first objective value, out of which all philosophy was built, was the existence of God. “God is!” was step A for the study of anything philosophical. Then the assumption that God was replaced with “natural law,”

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which, it could be argued, is the next best thing. In this century, even that has slipped away.

Dewey was certainly the strongest voice advocating a circular philosophy that began with man and ended with man and that paid little attention to the old values in the process of making that circle. This anthropocentrism, this humanism, of which Dewey was a fountainhead in this century, became pervasive in our American schools, especially at the graduate level. From that point on, the ruling point of view in American education was that there was to be no ruling point of view. It was Dewey who articulated the concept best of all.

What, then, is the fault of American education? Much could be said about many things—teaching methods, money, buildings, urbanization—but behind it all is the loss of the objective value of God and His Word. When the Bible and the knowledge of God was set aside with hardly a wisp of objection, it was easy for alternatives to fill that place. Evolution, Marxism, higher criticism, Freudianism, and other alien views moved into our school system and became basic assumptions. Nor did they have to shoot their way into the pantheon of American education. No, indeed, they were welcomed as the long-sought new answers to the basic questions of life. The new gods of the mind found themselves on the platform of an auditorium to which they had been denied even admission yesterday.

Is there a chance for a recovery of the American mind? Can the educational system that so surely creates that mind yet be preserved? The hour is late. We may indeed be approaching the night in which no man can work.

While a thousand suggestions could be made as to the location of the path to recovery, one is obvious and imperative. America must return to the God of its fathers. The West must again become in truth a “Christian civilization.” It must recover the doctrine of objective value that is God Himself and the revelation that is the Scripture that cannot be broken. Truly, the psalmist said, “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” (Psalm 9:17).

In considering this course of action we must not assume that the secular world will willingly turn en masse to the God who presides above the destinies of nations. It will take several more earthquakes, tornados, floods, and bloody battlefields to bring that to pass. God prefers not to do the work of producing repentance the hard way if He can help it.

That being the case, the initiative must lie with the church. Is there not a methodology that has not yet been tried? Indeed, there is. We need a form of evangelism, of outreach,

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of witness that is more than mere biblical simplicities. Christianity must articulate its case in public presentation that is characterized by theological soundness and scholarly, philosophic interpretations of life and reality. Whatever other accomplishments the church has produced in our time—and they have been many—we have not succeeded in winning the battle for the minds of men. Christianity has produced sympathy and perhaps even emotional agreement on the part of the world as it looks in the direction of the church. Still, the world has not heard us say that the God whom we serve is the only God and that one day all who live will stand before Him in judgment. Indeed, too many who profess Christ have involved themselves in sympathetic discussions with the modern pagans as to whose truth is the most applicable to the problems of life. In the process, they have neglected to announce that the Bible declares, “Let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written. That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged” (Romans 3:4). The instant Christianity agrees with the pluralizers that there are many forms of truth, its cause will be lost. From that point on, Christianity will have no choice except to meander along with relativists and mumble sweet nothings about God. That meandering may appear today to be through flower-strewn pathways, but it is the funeral march to the grave.

Still, the world of modern and very confused thought is ruled by its master, John Dewey. Alas, how different it might have been.²⁴

²⁴ Breese, D. (1990). *Seven men who rule the world from the grave* (pp. 151–177). Moody Publishers.