

Uniting Forces To Improve Education

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Who Invented Modern Educational Philosophy?

THERE has been in recent months a great deal of criticism of the philosophical basis of modern education. Some of it comes from religious sources, some from extreme right wing sources, some from would-be tax dodgers that adopt the philosophical argument as a convenient cloak to venality, and some from other sources. A frequent line of argument is that modern education is based upon a new and dangerous philosophy—the philosophy of pragmatism or instrumentalism. The argument usually proceeds by holding that this philosophy was invented by John Dewey who also philosophized about education. Education must, therefore, be bad if any of the great educational philosopher's statements can be held up to suspicion—as statements reflecting a relativism, a lack of belief in fundamental, unchanging principles; or as agnostic statements. Because educators have consistently quoted Dewey, and have, perhaps, given him more credit than he deserves for modern educational practice, they often find themselves in the position of having to defend both education and Dewey at the same time.

Now I would like to engage you in threshing some old straw. Let's take a look at some of the main ideas in the philosophy of modern education and trace them back a bit to see where they came from. Let's take the idea, for example, often expressed by Dewey, that education is the continuous reformation of experience.

Now where does this idea come from? Is it original with Dewey? No, this idea comes from Francis Bacon. More than 300 years ago, Bacon advocated that the methods of science be used in the methods of teaching. In science one begins with observable facts and derives a theory that is consistent with fact. One does not start with a principle and then automatically discard all experience that does not fit the principle. So too, should the learner, Bacon insisted, begin with simple observation of actual objects and phenomena.

Let's take another idea—that education is not merely preparation for life; education *is* life. Dewey proclaimed this principle. Kilpatrick developed it at great length. Where does this idea come from?

It comes from Froebel. Froebel said, "The child, the boy, the man should know no other endeavor but to be at every stage of development wholly what that stage calls for." He insisted that the child should enjoy life quite as much as the adult. The life and experience of school should have its own reward here and now. It should have full meaning for the pupil in the present.

Another idea that is part of Dewey's educational philosophy is by no means original with him. This is the idea of the "whole child." Froebel was the first to put forward the idea of the "whole child." Not just the mind, but the emotions and feelings, the bodily and spiritual development of the child were of concern to Froebel.

Where did the idea of "the child centered school" come from? Was it original with Dewey and the other modern philosophers of education? No, this idea comes from Jean Jacques Rousseau who fired one of the most devastating volleys against the formal-discipline brand of classical education.

Another cornerstone of Dewey's philosophy insists that dictates, precepts, externally forced discipline and the automatic inculcating of rigid habits are not only ineffective, they do damage to the individual pupil. He advocated the development of self-discipline in the learner and the reasoned, conscious adjustment of the individual to society. But Mulcaster early in the 17th century, and Pestalozzi, a century and a half later, were among the precursors of this point of view. Thus the arguments for cooperation, sympathy, and a kindlier discipline in teaching antedate Dewey at least 300 years. Above all, education is a practical matter to Dewey. The attainment of its objectives does not depend upon the mystical power of some special brand of subject matter. Teach what will be useful. Who first preached this notion? Chatolais, Leibnitz, Francke, Benjamin Franklin, and Horace Mann—if you wish to call *them* pragmatists—are among the precursors of Dewey.

There has been a tendency among many educators to credit Dewey with having created almost single-handedly the modern educational point of view. But actually, the modern educational point of view derives from hundreds of sources. Dewey drew upon ideas which have, over the past three or four hundred years, helped to shape the modern western tradition. But the philosophical position of modern education by no means starts with Dewey. It antedates him several centuries. Educators would be wise to keep this in mind, and never

go to the defense of modern education because of what any *one* man has written about it.

What Dewey did was this. He knit together into a consistent system many of the ideas advanced by his predecessors. But he added two very important elements to the ideas of his predecessors. He wrote about an education suitable to the kind of society and government which we have here in the United States. He cut loose in many ways from the presuppositions which had governed European thought and behavior. The rise of democracy in this country outstripped its growth in any other section of the world. The ideas of the western tradition needed to be re-examined in terms of the American free society. This Dewey did. So a cornerstone of his philosophy is democracy.

Dewey is also a pragmatist. To a pragmatist the ultimate test of whether a thing is good depends upon its results or consequences. Those things which contribute to the continued growth of the individual and of the society of which he is a part would be judged good. This concern with results is also part of the basic philosophy of most American businessmen and manufacturers. It is basically an American doctrine derived from American common sense. Pragmatism grew up out of the American concern for the practical and stands today as America's most important contribution to the history of philosophy. Any attack upon pragmatism is an attack upon an essentially *American* idea. Educators would be wise to keep this in mind, also, and never go on the defensive because the philosophy of modern education is designed specially for American freedom and based upon an American philosophy.

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