

## ‘When FM met John Dewey’ by Malcolm Williamson

### Who was John Dewey?

John Dewey was a member of the American group of philosophers known as the “pragmatists” that included William James and Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced “Purse”). His life spanned a period of unprecedented change: 1869, the year of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* to 1952 and post-industrial society. His life followed the trend from rural upbringing to city-life, much like Alexander’s. Unlike Alexander, Dewey was at the centre of academia – becoming a revered national sage – whereas Alexander remained (in his own words) “an outsider”.

### How did the two men meet?

Briefly (as it’s covered in Bloch’s biography) Ethel Webb became Alexander’s assistant after reading *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (1910). Her interest in the new educational methods took her to Maria Montessori’s first conference in Rome, 1912. There, she met Irene Tasker and the American, Margaret Naumburg. Naumburg knew Evelyn Dewey and the Dewey family; Tasker had read William James’s *Talks to Teachers* (1899). Later (1915), she attended Dewey’s afternoon lectures at Columbia (Murray). Talking together, the three recognised “congenial feature” in the ideas of Dewey and Alexander. Both Tasker and Naumburg returned to London with Webb to take lessons. When war was declared in 1914, Naumburg offered Tasker a teaching post in her new school, and it was decided that Alexander should go to New York. Naumburg arranged for him to give lessons to her circle of intellectual friends. Alexander began an annual routine of spending the winter months in America. In 1917, he finally began giving lessons, first to Dewey’s wife Alice and, shortly after, to Dewey himself. Their friendship endured for 36 years (Murray).

From what he wrote in the introductions to Alexander’s books, we know that Alexander influenced Dewey’s philosophy. Eric McCormack wrote the authoritative thesis on Alexander’s “neglected influence” (1958). I think the influence was equally profound in the other direction, and I’ve tried to identify some of the changes that can be attributed to Dewey in my paper, ‘Dewey’s Influence on Alexander’ (*Alexander Journal* 26, pp. 29-44). I don’t think Alexander’s ideas can be fully understood without including Dewey’s influence. It puzzles me why he features so little on our training courses. Walter Carrington, for instance, barely mentioned him except in reference to the well-known phrase “thinking in activity”. (Someone explained to me that because Bertrand Russell regarded Dewey as a “second-rate philosopher”, Walter was inclined to dismiss him.)

Referring to his lessons with Alexander, Dewey later wrote (1932):

*In the study [lessons] I found the things which I had " known "—in the sense of theoretical belief—in philosophy and psychology, changed into vital experiences which gave a new meaning to knowledge of them.*

What did Dewey mean; what had he already “known” in theory to which Alexander’s lessons generated a practical realisation?

## Progressive education

Dewey’s ideas are generally regarded as nothing short of a revolution in the meaning of “education”. His educational philosophy was at the forefront of the “progressive” movement. Dewey rejected the traditional belief that human nature and conduct were fixed according to certain essential ‘drives’ and ‘instincts’.<sup>1</sup>

## The individual in society

Human nature, for Dewey, was infinitely malleable and, what’s more, was moulded by the interrelationship between individuals and the society in which they lived their lives. Human nature is not fixed but is its self a changing, growing aspect of experience.

## Democracy

Democracy was at the heart of Dewey’s educational philosophy and the key to his aim was to revolutionise what was thought of as *education*. Traditionally (since the Greeks) western education was inherently dualistic in aim and outlook. In a nutshell, “education” was of two different kinds: “Liberal Arts”,<sup>2</sup> for those who would be the cultured leaders of society, and vocational, for those who would support them by manual labour.

Educationally, instead of division, no limits can be set to the possibilities possessed by human beings and the key aim of democratic education is to devise methods that will stimulate the development of individual possibilities, whatever they are, and regardless of traditionally accepted views of learning.

## William James’ theory of habit

Dewey’s philosophy was indebted to William James’s theory of habit. When habit is seen as both physiological and social in its origins, revolutionary implications for education are the consequence.

As James wrote, we not only acquire a collection of habits through our experiences but our habits define who we are: we *are* our habits. There is the two-way influence of experience – experience as something we have and also what we become. In appreciating art, for instance, there is an interaction between object and subject – i.e. looking at a painting we imbue it with meaning drawn from our own experiences. Society (family, class, profession, institutions, etc.) “clothes” us in ways to think and behave (James, Vol 1: 121-122). Thus, education has the aim of cultivating and developing “good” habits both for self-fulfilment

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<sup>1</sup> Memory, reasoning, moral sense, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Astronomy, Mathematics, Geometry and Music with added Oratory (Dialectic – i.e. reason, Rhetoric and Grammar).

and service to society. It is not so much what we read or hear or say that affects and shapes what we are, but how our bodily responses and our attitudes are conditioned by or activities, what we do; by our interactions with people and things that's important. Instead of education involving the rote learning of stuff that is already known, the Deweyan revolution takes the educational process as primarily a matter of discovering *our* possibilities and of devising methods that will help us both to discover and develop them.

In his introduction to Alexander's *Use of the Self*, Dewey describes the fundamental role of habitual wrong use and its part in "generating all kinds of unnecessary tensions and wastes of energy", the vitiation [distortion] of our sensory appreciations "which form the material of our judgements of ourselves", and the "great change in moral and mental attitude" that takes place as proper co-ordinations are [re-]established.

Dewey must have recognised that Alexander's method for moving from "known" habit to the realisation of other potentialities was just such a method for embodied learning and "discovering our possibilities". Dewey helped Alexander reframe his work in the context of education and, with the new biology-based psychology, to move forward from nineteenth century metaphysics.

## Learning by doing

If we know anything about Dewey, we know the slogan, "learning by doing." Nothing could better state the educational consequence of the James-Dewey psychology of habit (see "boy who stoops" in Alexander 1918/1996, p. 170). To form "good" habits, our intentions must be acted upon and not simply remain as ideas. The role of education is, thus, to help children to the richest experiences possible for them.

## Childhood experience

Childhood is no longer regarded as a preparation for adulthood. Children are not seen as potential barbarians who have to be moulded into acceptable predetermined patterns, passive instruments in the hands of a superior wisdom of adults. Instead of superimposing irrelevant facts to be learned by rote, childhood is to be lived on its own account. Education is seen as a series of exciting undertakings, experiments and projects. The special subjects are to be related to the child's discovery of them self and their world. By engaging in activities of interest to the child and relevance to its daily life and stage of cognitive development he or she develops an inner self-discipline (inhibition) relative to the ends they have in view. This is the democratic counter to the discipline (control) of authority. So, we see that inhibition, as Alexander uses the term, is fundamental to Dewey's educational plan; the "unconditional necessity of inhibition of customary acts" (*UOS*) to end slavish following of custom and habit.

*Duality: mind-body, object-subject, knowing-doing, reason-emotion, self-non-self, theory-practice, means-ends, being-becoming etc.*

We could explore another major theme in Dewey's philosophy, the resolution of dualism in all its manifestations. Dewey does not think of a person as having a body and a mind, but is "mind-body" (the hyphen being Dewey's "unsuccessful" attempt to express unity). There is the inherent duality in traditional education (e.g. the 11+ exam), the superiority of the intellect over physicality and manual skill. From CCCI, Alexander uses the expression, "learning and learning to do" to convey conceptual knowledge and implicit, practical know-how.

## Dewey's writing style

Like Alexander, Dewey, stubbornly and laboriously used common language rather than resort to jargon to clarify his meanings. In a similar way, his writing is "difficult," studded as it is with qualifying clauses, qualified in turn, in order to say as precisely as possible what it is he has in mind.

## Mankind's future

For all the headaches and heartaches of the contemporary world, we see [though Dewey] that we are in a commanding position with respect to the future. Better than any age in the history of mankind, we are able to see the wonderful malleability, the infinite plasticity, of human nature.

Just as modern technology has created a new industrial potential, so democracy stands for new human potential. And just as we may choose to use new technology in old ways for self-serving gain or create new applications for the widest public welfare, so democracy in education can help access new human capacities that, when applied intelligently, can be used for the common good (Nathanson).

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## Appendix: The key years of Dewey's life for our purposes

1859 born in Burlington, Vermont

1896, when Dewey opened his experimental school – Laboratory School – at Chicago

1904 professor of philosophy at Columbia University, New York (till retirement in 1930).

1910 *How We Think* (revised 1933)

1915 *Schools of To-morrow* (with daughter, Evelyn Dewey, Bureau of Educational Experiments)

1916 *Democracy and Education*

1917 Began lessons with Alexander

1918 Introduction to *MSI*

1922 *Human Nature and Conduct*

1923 Introduction to *CCCI*

1925 *Experience and Nature*

1932 Introduction to *UOS*

1938 *Experience and Education*

Died 1952

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