

I

Introduction

Reading *Democracy and Education*

DAVID T. HANSEN

What is John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*? In a literal sense, it is a study of education and its relation to the individual and society. Moreover, Dewey tells us, it is a philosophical rather than historical, sociological, or political inquiry. His original title for the work was *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. That was the heading he had in view when he signed a contract to undertake the project on July 21, 1911, with the Macmillan Company of New York (MW.9.377). However, his publishers convinced him to change the title in light of pressing political issues triggered by the cataclysm of World War I. Dewey completed the text in August 1915, and it came out the following year with his original title converted into a subtitle. The book constitutes Dewey's philosophical response to the rapid social, economic, political, cultural, and technological change he was witness to over the course of his long life. Born in 1859, when the United States was largely an agrarian society, by the time Dewey pens his educational treatise the country had become an industrial, urban world undergoing endless and often jarring transformations, a process that continues unabated through the present. Dewey sought to articulate and justify the education he believed people needed to comprehend and shape creatively and humanely these unstoppable changes.

At the same time, Dewey endeavored in the book to respond to what many critics regard as the two most influential educational works ever written prior to the twentieth century: Plato's *Republic* (fourth

century B.C.E.) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (published in 1762). Those two works are monumental, comprehensive treatments of the meaning and purposes of education. They are variously powerful, beautiful, edifying, controversial, off-putting, and unforgettable for anyone who comes to grips with their originality and sheer breadth of concern. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey makes plain his intellectual debt to Plato and Rousseau, even as he underscores his differences with them. The book becomes an occasion for him to enact Aristotle's dictum that, when it comes to inquiry, the scholar must love truth more than the ideas held by her or his teachers.

Still another response to the question What is *Democracy and Education*? is that it was Dewey's favorite among his many publications (Ryan, 1995, p. 181). In one of his rare autobiographical writings, Dewey remarked that an interest in education resided at the core of his intellectual development. "This interest fused with and brought together," he wrote, "what might otherwise have been separate interests—that in psychology and that in social institutions and social life" (LW.5.156). He juxtaposed that admission with his amazement at how little attention professional philosophers, as a rule, devoted to educational questions. As an intellectual tribe, they simply do not, according to Dewey, acknowledge "that philosophizing should focus about education as the supreme human interest in which, moreover, other problems, cosmological, moral, logical, come to a head" (LW.5.156). In general, Dewey's fellow philosophers ignored *Democracy and Education* (it bears emphasizing that when he published it he was Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University). "Although [this book] was for many years," Dewey opined, "that in which my philosophy, such as it is, was most fully expounded, I do not know that philosophic critics, as distinct from teachers, have ever had recourse to it" (LW.5.156). But if philosophers, with notable exceptions, have tended to ignore the book, the rest of the world has not. Its worldwide audience over the last ninety years has consisted of students in colleges of education, educational practitioners and researchers, humanities and social science faculty in many disciplines, public intellectuals, and readers of countless other stripes and persuasions. The book has been the most widely translated of all Dewey's works, appearing in a dozen languages (Ryan, 1995, p. 181). Whether the book will continue to be read in the decades ahead remains a separate question that I will address at the close of this introductory chapter.

My purposes here are to provide an overview of Dewey's project and to outline the substance and aims of the chapters that follow. However, neither here nor anywhere else is it possible to answer definitively the question, What is *Democracy and Education*? Dewey sets his tasks

and goes about them in his usual thorough, insightful, and determined (if not relentless) manner. But his thought, his writing style, his terms, his tone, his trajectory, outrun him, or outdo him, throughout the text. What Karl Jaspers said of Immanuel Kant can be said of Dewey's book, with some adjustment: "Kant is a nodal point in modern philosophy. His work contains as many possibilities as life itself. Consciously, Kant proceeded with rational precision, yet his work is shot through with thoughts that go beyond the 'system' and that Kant in turn strove to understand as part of his doctrine. It remains a source of boundless inspiration" (1962, p. 153). Dewey writes systematically, but he does not seek a critical system in the sense to which Kant aspired (cf. LW.5.155). Dewey strives for rational precision, but his irrepressible passion regarding the gifts of life constantly erupts through his language (this point could also be said for moments in Kant's writing). Jaspers's words are on the mark regarding how "shot through" *Democracy and Education* is with uncontrollable insights and provocations. The latter are not always clear or comprehensible. For example, Dewey's statements about "mind" are often opaque and elliptical. This fact reveals Dewey's own struggle to understand the very ideas that emerged on the typewriter page before him. (Just as Orpheus's lyre grew into his shoulder, one could say Dewey's typewriter grew into his arms, given the man's phenomenal published output, which has been issued in thirty-seven volumes.) Dewey's words sometimes shimmer like reflections from a lake on the hanging leaves overhead. At times, he writes as if he's trying to capture a shimmer, yet finds it flashing out of his grasp.

Moreover, Dewey confessed, "probably there is in the consciously articulated ideas of every thinker an over-weighing of just those things that are contrary to his natural tendencies, an emphasis upon those things that are contrary to his intrinsic bent, and which, therefore, he has to struggle to bring to expression, while the native bent, on the other hand, can take care of itself" (LW.5.150). Throughout *Democracy and Education*, Dewey's "native bent" for formal and schematic philosophical writing jostles with his ethical and emotional awareness of the demands of actual human experience. Sometimes there are sparks when these elements meet, and sometimes a quiet fusion. At moments Dewey coolly works his way through an argument. At others he sounds like a poet or orator moved by a vision of what could be. He reveals his emotional, moral, and intellectual aversion to all forms of thinking that, in his view, console, isolate, or narrow the mind, rather than opening it up for a constructive response to human affairs. His impulses are so strong that he has difficulties, at times, in handling certain concepts and ideas, almost as if they felt uncomfortable to the touch.

Readers of American letters will recognize Dewey's joyful, inspired, and maddening challenge. There are recurrent and sometimes explicit echoes throughout the book of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Jane Addams, and many others driven to enthusiastic if also frustrated distraction by the promise of what the nation could become. Dewey seeks in his book to engage what Emerson (1983/1844) called "this new yet unapproachable America" (p. 485)—an America no longer moored politically and culturally to Europe, yet with its identity confused, uncertain, and undetermined, as remains the case today. Dewey aims to articulate the educational vision needed to help the nation achieve its highest ideals in practice, while keeping those very ideals under criticism so that they function as sources of hope and imagination rather than closed outlooks. However, just as Plato and Rousseau sought to write beyond their own societies, Dewey has in view not just his own country but any community that aspires to be democratic in conduct rather than merely in name. He writes in the spirit of a cosmopolitan, humane world he envisions coming into being. He does not proffer a crude American exceptionalism, so endlessly damaging near and far, any more than do the other figures previously mentioned, even if like them he cannot (and would not want to) leave behind his local horizons. Dewey's disarmingly titled "Introduction to the Philosophy of Education" is at once a sustained, disciplined philosophical inquiry into education, and an epic, poetic evocation of human possibility.

Dewey's Historical Moment:
A Reading of the Book's Preface

Dewey published *Democracy and Education* in the midst of what would come to be called World War I. The United States was still a neutral state, although inching ever closer to joining the Allied side and, in retrospect, moving further down the road that would lead to its current superpower status. Meantime, the nation had been undergoing an astounding transformation since the bloody Civil War of 1861–1865 had nearly sundered it. Urban and industrial growth, waves of immigration and internal migration, the expansion of education, imperial actions overseas, international commerce, new modes of transportation and communication, scientific and artistic breakthroughs, and much more, generated a more or less permanent state of social possibility and experiment, as well as unsettlement and unpredictability. A keen observer and commentator on these rapid changes, Dewey intended his book to shed light on their fundamental educational and sociopolitical consequences. What do the changes exact of us, Dewey asked, with regards to the philosophy of life and education we articulate, criticize, and seek to realize?

Dewey signals his purposes in his brief preface to *Democracy and Education*. The preface consists of the following paragraph, and a subsequent one in which he acknowledges his debt to several generations of students as well as to several critics. “The following pages,” Dewey writes,

embody an endeavor to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply these ideas to the problems of the enterprise of education. The discussion includes an indication of the constructive aims and methods of public education as seen from this point of view, and a critical estimate of the theories of knowing and moral development which were formulated in earlier social conditions, but which still operate, in societies nominally democratic, to hamper the adequate realization of the democratic ideal. As will appear from the book itself, the philosophy stated in the book connects the growth of democracy with the development of the experimental method in the sciences, evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences, and the industrial reorganization, and is concerned to point out the changes in subject matter and method of education indicated by these developments. (MW.9.3; unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references are to this volume)

Written after the completion of the book itself, these prefatory words sound flat-footed and anticlimatic. The passive voice, the mechanical listing of topics, and the matter-of-fact, almost ho-hum tone, do not amount to much of an invitation to read on. Perhaps Dewey was weary after writing the book’s twenty-six chapters, which range over almost every conceivable aspect of educational thought and practice. Or perhaps he was bowing to his publishers, who had put forward the idea for *Democracy and Education* by urging Dewey to write a textbook for teachers. Dewey’s curt preface certainly sounds textbookish.

However, if we listen, his language expands, beginning in the first of the three sentences that comprise his remarks. The book will “embody an endeavor to detect and state.” It will be an inquiry, an endeavor, rather than a demonstration or proof. Dewey will try to “detect” ideas “implied in a democratic society,” suggesting the ever-present possibility of failure in that task. He will “endeavor” to state those ideas, to give them form, but once more the emphasis is on effort, on a trial, on an attempt, rather than on a presumption of accomplishment. Moreover, after undertaking this project, he will then “endeavor” to “apply” the ideas to problems in education, suggesting a final time the risk of being unsuccessful. What sounded mechanical at first glance has become, at second hearing, uncertain, unstable, and unsteady. Moreover, the book

will “embody” Dewey’s inquiry, meaning that from start to finish it *constitutes* an endeavor rather than a polished post-inquiry product. Dewey all but says the project will feature surprises, openings, unanticipated conclusions, and routes identified but not taken. What a strange text-book to offer readers: an ongoing journey rather than a packaged, contained, and prefigured artifact.

Dewey’s second sentence, longer than the first but not as long as the third and last, marks out his interest in public education, an institution that had been growing rapidly in its reach in the United States. Armed with “ideas implied in a democratic society,” Dewey plans in the book to highlight “constructive” educational aims and methods, those that both mirror and help bring into being a democratic society. Dewey’s qualifier anticipates one of the most familiar claims in the book, that education signifies the “reconstruction” of experience “which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (p. 82). Constructing, making, bringing into being that which was not there before, *poesis*, as the Ancient Greeks put it: these terms describe the view of education Dewey will try to “state” (i.e., create, make, build) in the pages to come. Dewey’s qualifier also provides a strong hint that he will be criticizing what he regards as *unconstructive* or positively destructive aims and methods. He further discloses that strategy in the latter portion of the second sentence, when he refers to theories of knowledge and of morality whose consequences, he tells us, are still at work in society to the detriment of its democratic emergence. I write emergence mindful of Dewey’s extraordinary claim that his own and other so-called democratic societies are that *in name only*—they are, he says, “nominally” democratic. To employ Emerson’s term, they may be “approaching” democracy, but they have not yet moved into that condition. Dewey conceives his book as an instrument to help further and support the approach. In this process, he will not willfully reject previous conceptions of knowledge and morality, any more than he will crudely toss aside previous views of teaching and learning. Instead, he will reconstruct them. He will draw from them what he sees as vital while excising what he believes “hamper[s]” the realization of democracy. We do not know, at this threshold juncture, why Dewey finds so telling a society’s moral and epistemological presuppositions. The entire book will generate his response, culminating in his concluding two chapters that explicitly take up the nature and impact of theories of knowledge and morality.

Dewey’s final, and cumbersome, sentence remains not only elliptical but enigmatic. Just as he wrote the preface after writing the book, so it seems that readers can only fathom the preface after reading (and

re-reading) the text. However, Dewey does anticipate his path. He hopes to “state” how his philosophy of education “connects the growth of democracy” with contemporary forces and trends. Dewey will make plain time and again how crucial is the idea of “connection” in his educational and democratic outlook, along with its associated concepts of communication and continuity. The entire philosophy will pivot around the familiar, provocative, still controversial idea of “growth,” which Dewey describes not as *having* an end or outcome but as *itself* the finest end or outcome of education (p. 54). He argues that growth is “relative” to nothing save more growth, and concludes that education thus implies no greater end than the capacity for further education. Correspondingly, the “growth of democracy” to which he refers in the preface embodies its own end. That is, a democratic way of life is not a means to some larger end or outcome. It is itself the *realization* of political, social, and educational ends supportive of growth. As he summarizes: “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 93).

Dewey will also argue in the book that this democratic “mode of associated living” emerges naturally and organically from forces such as those he names in the preface: the rise of the experimental method in science, the idea of evolution in biology, and what he calls “the industrial reorganization.” Any reader familiar with Dewey will recognize that by “experimental method,” he denotes nothing more, nor less, than the process he described through his verb choices in the first sentence of the preface: “endeavor,” “detect,” “state,” “apply,” and so forth. He will go on to show just how pregnant with meaning and action are these and related verbs associated with inquiry. Moreover, inquiry remains indispensable to democracy, since the latter obliges people to learn constantly from one another, which means learning to study others’ ideas, claims, hopes, and practices, as well as their own.

The idea of evolution remains decisive for democracy, according to Dewey, because it reveals that humanity has no preset or predetermined nature. It is true that humanity’s horizon of possibility and creativity remains bounded by physical forces, which may themselves be evolving, but its scope is indeterminate. That fact, for Dewey, leads to democracy precisely because it renders suspect any and all claims that it is natural for one group of people to dominate or control another in autocratic fashion. Posed differently, the idea undermines every dogmatic viewpoint, whether religious or secular, about the presumed meaning of being human. At the same time, the idea of evolution suggests humanity has no predetermined, fixed *telos* or end state. Once more, for Dewey, this idea gives rise to democracy because it dissolves claims to know the final

destiny of humanity as well as corresponding assertions about what humanity must do to reach that alleged terminus. The wheel turns, and we discern why Dewey suggests that the aim of democracy is democracy itself, just as the aim of growth is further growth.

These points also illuminate, from another angle, why Dewey esteems inquiry. If human beings are not predetermined entities with pre-set destinies, but rather are persons who can influence their very nature through education and social interaction, then it behooves them to learn to question, to criticize, to converse (whether through word or other media), and to be modest and fair-minded in their claims.

Finally, “the industrial reorganization” encompasses all the economic, social, and technological changes touched on previously. The term may also point to the antitrust legislation, the formation of labor unions, and the like that had been taking place in the years before his book appeared. According to Dewey, the conditions for democracy are a natural, organic outgrowth of this “reorganization.” As he writes in chapter 7 of his book: “The widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities which characterize a democracy [as a way of life], are not of course the product of deliberation and conscious effort. On the contrary, they were caused by the development of modes of manufacture and commerce, travel, migration, and intercommunication which flowed from the command of science over natural energy” (p. 93). However, Dewey argues that while these circumstances have created conditions for democracy, they cannot in themselves bring it into being. For that task, education is needed: “But after greater individualization on one hand, and a broader community of interest on the other have come into existence, it is a matter of deliberate effort to sustain and extend them” (p. 93). Dewey adds: “Travel, economic and commercial tendencies, have at present gone far to break down external barriers; to bring peoples and classes into closer and more perceptible connection with one another. It remains for the most part to secure the intellectual and emotional significance of this physical annihilation of space” (p. 92). According to Dewey, education constitutes the vehicle for this intellectual and emotional turn in human perception.

What may strike the reader, at first glance, as a rather wooden opening to *Democracy and Education*, becomes on second glance a striking preview of some key themes Dewey will take up in the text. Although highly compressed and elliptical, his preface remains conjoined with the work as a whole, perhaps especially through his emphasis on the existential need for inquiry. That need entails both openness to the world and critical reflection and response. In a democracy, or in what Dewey calls

an associated mode of communicative living, inquiry is not the provenance of a select few. It is the privilege and the obligation of everyone. On the one hand, as Dewey clarifies elsewhere, full-time scholars and researchers should make available to the public the results and findings of their work. On the other hand, the task of citizens is to influence policy by judging the outcomes of formal inquiry in light of shared public concerns (LW.2.365). In sum, Dewey does not contend that everyone must become a researcher in a formal sense, in part because there are countless other important social roles and activities in a complex society. He does suggest that a spirit of inquiry characterizes a genuine democracy.

Dewey may also highlight the fact that the book constitutes an inquiry because he is mindful of how challenging readers will find his claims. For example, some may be thrown from the very start by the notion that the United States is a democracy in name rather than in practice. Others readers, as they make their way through the early chapters, may find jarring Dewey's comparisons between so-called savage and civilized groups, until they discern that he is not making empirical claims but rather a theoretical distinction between groups that willingly adapt to change as contrasted with those that do not or will not. Posed differently, he distinguishes groups that seek or accept genuine contact with others from those that reject it out of hand. Given the inexorable changes he witnessed in his lifetime, which he believed would become even more accelerated in the future, Dewey did not believe it possible to achieve complete communal isolation.

However, in perceiving this outlook some readers may be unsettled by Dewey's further suggestion that the United States is not only still on the road to becoming a democracy, rather than having arrived, but is also not yet civilized. It does not yet feature an ethos, in his view, in which groups and communities—especially those with the greatest political and economic resources—deliberately seek out contact with others who differ in outlook and practice, in part so that society can transform itself peacefully rather than violently. Moreover, time and again in the early chapters Dewey emphasizes that technological, scientific, and economic prowess does not in itself constitute civilization. Rather, it is the uses to which this expertise is put that determine the question—in particular, whether these vaunted tools and powers are deployed to enhance and expand the experience of everyone rather than of only a few (see, e.g., pp. 42, 8, 9, 10). In his preface, Dewey implies that readers will need to take on the posture of inquirers themselves if they are to engage these and other arguments. He does not expect agreement as the outcome of the process, but he does hope for the engagement.

The Scope and Structure of *Democracy and Education*

Each of the twenty-six chapters in Dewey's book ends with what he calls a summary. That organizational feature reflects his intent, at his publishers' request, to write a textbook for educators. However, any reader of *Democracy and Education* swiftly discovers that Dewey's so-called summaries are more than that. They do take a look back at the themes and ideas he has put forward. But they also advance his arguments. Many of them contain expressions, formulations, conjectures, and hopes not found in the preceding sections of the respective chapter. If the twenty-six summaries were extracted from the book and bound into a text of their own, they would make for fascinating reading in their own right.

I offer here an interpretive synopsis, but not a summary, of the book so that readers can have it in hand as they work through the chapters that lie ahead. *Democracy and Education* features four primary sections, although they are not identified as such in the preface or table of contents. They form, Dewey says, a logical perspective toward the book's structure. Dewey himself offers a snapshot of the first three parts, in a set of pages that appears to embody the advice of one or more critics of a draft of the work (pp. 331–333). Someone may have said to him that, at this point in the text, readers could use a platform to gather themselves before climbing the final steps to the summit.

In chapters 1–5 of the book, Dewey examines why education is fundamental to the nature and perpetuation of any human community, however humble or vast it may be in size and scope of activity. According to Dewey, education is decisive for *renewal* of human culture and society. The idea of renewal constitutes the very first theme Dewey takes up in the book, as he compares differences between living and inanimate things. That beginning captures one of the primary passions informing the project. *Democracy and Education* constitutes a wake-up call, a sometimes harsh reminder that too much human existence remains, in metaphorical terms, inanimate as contrasted with truly alive. From the start, Dewey criticizes social customs, traditions, and ideals that he believes suppress the flowering of human thought, imagination, creativity, and individuality. In so doing, they suppress the emergence of democracy itself and its organic commitment to the growth of all persons. For Dewey, unexamined customs and traditions, however beloved, can render human life less *animate* than it might otherwise be: less artful, meaningful, joyful, hopeful, and sublime. Dewey never advocates the wholesale repudiation of convention. Far from it: inquiry and communication may affirm long-standing ideals and practices. However, for Dewey such a process implies that the conventional would no longer be merely conventional. It will have been

revitalized, or reanimated, precisely by undergoing the democratic crucible of inquiry and criticism.

In the opening chapters, and at several points elsewhere in the book, Dewey pays tribute to precursors such as F. W. A. Froebel and J. F. Herbart for their generative ideas, even as he unsparingly points out limitations he detects in their outlooks. The chapters introduce concepts that Dewey will employ throughout the inquiry, among them communication, environment, direction, control, and growth. He puts them to work immediately in the subsequent part of the book, encompassing chapters 6–14. Chapter 6 (more precisely, its second half) and chapter 7 highlight, respectively, the idea of education as the continuous, expansive reconstruction of human experience, and the idea of democracy as a way of life. Dewey shows how the idea of democracy as “a mode of conjoint, communicated experience” establishes a criterion for the reorganization of contemporary educational practice. Democracy can only exist if practice is reconstructed so that all persons can, in principle, realize their potential as human beings. Conversely, Dewey argues that the very idea of democracy is implied in the core understanding of education as reconstruction, as the continuous growth of all persons. If that process is taking place, democracy itself emerges all the more substantively. Thus, Dewey titles his pivotal chapter 7, “The Democratic Conception *in* Education” (my emphasis). He establishes an ecological, symbiotic relation between democracy and education.

Guided by these ideas, chapters 8–14 constitute an artful, imaginative, and powerful study of factors that reside at the heart of teaching and learning: aims, motivation, interest, self-discipline, social interaction, thinking, method, subject matter, and more. Dewey works tirelessly to establish organic continuity between these terms because he believes they are all, without exception, no more than heuristics for understanding and advancing education. As such, they have immense value. However, the terms do not describe discrete, separate phenomena. They denote aspects or phases of the total experience of teaching and learning.

For example, subject matter literally exists only *in* methods of teaching, learning, inquiring, and communicating, just as those methods only come into being, or exist, *in* subject matter. Divorced from method, subject matter is better characterized as inert stuff, no more animate than stones and steel. Divorced from subject matter, method becomes mythological, a term Dewey employs throughout the book to identify ideas and beliefs that have been reified (or deified) and that, as such, denote absolutely nothing about experience (p. 67). According to Dewey, for instance, there is no such thing as perception without perceiving *something* (p. 70). Certainly, there are particular biological and physical conditions that make

sight possible. However, those conditions are not synonymous with perception. They do not cause, for example, one person to perceive sunsets while another person does not. People can single out the concept perception for many valuable heuristic purposes. But they need to be on guard against drawing the conclusion that because they can isolate and discuss the concept, there must be something discrete in the universe called perception apart from percepts.

After presenting the core of his view of genuinely educational practice, Dewey examines in chapters 15–23 a wide array of historical and contemporary assumptions about education and human experience that he argues are hampering what he called in his preface “the adequate realization of the democratic ideal.” These chapters read like a philosophical critique of the entire history of Western thought and action. Their reach is as remarkable as Dewey’s ability to sustain control over his analysis and not become submerged in either details or too many large ideas at once. He seeks to illuminate both the origins and the deleterious consequences of dualistic thinking that separates mind from body, intellectual from physical work, thought from action, individual from society, social class from social class, humanism from naturalism, and more. He examines the place of specific subjects in education, including geography, history, science, art, and the humanities. He highlights the human values both embodied in and expressed through these subjects. At the same time, he argues for the organic unity of values. He criticizes educational schemes predicated on the assumption that only subjects like literature have aesthetic value, and that only so-called vocational subjects like auto mechanics have practical value. Dewey shows that any well-taught subject yields aesthetic, intellectual, moral, and practical values and meanings. He connects this part of the inquiry to the activities of people after they complete school. He examines connections between play and work, occupations and human growth, labor and leisure, appreciation and production, and more. He continues to root his philosophical criticism in cultural, economic, political, and sociological observations of the current scene. Along the way, he pauses to consider and criticize ideas from Plato, Rousseau, G. W. F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and other influential thinkers.

In the fourth and final part of the book, encompassing chapters 24–26, Dewey takes up philosophy, knowledge, and morals. In contrast with the often decontextualized, theoretical treatment of these topics in the history of ideas, Dewey remains grounded in his view of the contemporary world. That fact does not imply his discussion lacks complexity or philosophical sophistication. Quite on the contrary. But it may help explain why professional philosophers have tended to ignore the book. In a nutshell, it does not employ their lingo. Instead, Dewey refers to specific

societal assumptions, divisions, and aspirations regarding everything from the purposes of schools to what it means to lead a morally worthy life. He criticizes prior and current conceptions of philosophy, knowledge, and morals, and, through the lens of his democratic criterion of growth, offers his own considered interpretation of each.

According to Dewey, philosophy “might almost be described as thinking which has become conscious of itself—which has generalized its place, function, and value in experience” (p. 336). More substantively, Dewey claims, philosophy is another name for “the general theory of education” (p. 338). He recalls the historic fact that European philosophy, in fundamental respects, originated with the response by the Greeks to pressing educational concerns. One of Plato’s most influential dialogues, *Meno*, opens with the question, “Can you tell me Socrates—is virtue something that can be taught?” (1961, p. 354). Meno’s question not only highlights content, in this case what we would today call moral education, but also spotlights a perplexing problem of pedagogy: is teaching the same thing as telling? For Dewey, philosophy describes the deliberate criticism of ideas, values, methods, and actions with a view toward extracting from them all that might prove generative of growth for individuals and for society alike. He enacts that very conception of philosophy throughout *Democracy and Education*.

Knowledge is another name for conduct carried out with intelligence, foresight, and awareness of the outcomes of preceding conditions and actions. Knowledge does not mean the same thing as a storehouse of information (cf. p. 195). It is not the possession of a spectator removed from all action. It is not a possession, period. For Dewey, knowledge describes an ability to act effectively in the world. Such action may involve working with others, raising a family, cultivating friendships, and building a career. It can involve undertaking a painting, interpreting a poem, driving a car, and preparing a meal. A knowledgeable person, Dewey avers, is a person who knows her or his way about a particular scene of life: the kitchen, the gymnasium, the chemistry laboratory, or the book, the film, the poem. In the broadest sense, a knowledgeable person habitually seeks connections and continuity across the doings of her or his life. Dewey carries this image into the final chapter of his book, on theories of morals.

Morals describe what people variously call obligations to others, duties, justice, virtue, character, and so forth. Dewey catalogues theories of morals that privilege one or another of these terms—and then punctures all the balloons. *None* of the terms, he contends, marks out a separate realm of life to be dubbed “morality.” He argues that the terms capture aspects or phases of human experience in which questions of the

goodness or rightness of ideas and actions have become prominent. Thus, concepts like justice and virtue are useful for understanding and, thereby, expanding experience, but they confuse and intimidate people if they are divorced from other facets of experience. “All of the separations which we have been criticizing,” Dewey declaims, “spring from taking morals too narrowly—giving them, on one side, a sentimental goody-goody turn without reference to effective ability to do what is socially needed, and, on the other side, overemphasizing convention and tradition so as to limit morals to a list of definitely stated acts. As a matter of fact, morals are as broad as acts which concern our relationships with others. And potentially this includes all our acts. . . . For every act, by the principle of habit, modifies disposition—it sets up a certain kind of inclination and desire” (p. 367).

Dewey dramatizes his view of the unity of experience by referring to “moral knowledge,” thereby fusing terms often treated as separate and unrelated in the history of both ideas and human practices. “The knowledge of dynamite of a safecracker may be identical in verbal form with that of a chemist,” Dewey writes; “in fact, it is different, for it is knit into connection with different aims and habits, and thus has a different import” (p. 365). Knowledge does not exist in a vacuum apart from values and commitments. All knowledge, according to Dewey (keeping in mind that it is not synonymous with information), “connects” with people’s aims, habits, aspirations, and more. All of the latter, implicitly, harbor moral meaning because they all presume ‘this is better than that’ or ‘this is good and that is bad’ or ‘it is right to value or do this rather than that.’ Summarizing his book-length outlook on education, and echoing yet again the democratic criterion he has articulated, Dewey writes that “what is learned and employed in an occupation having an aim and involving cooperation with others is moral knowledge, whether consciously so regarded or not. For it builds up a social interest and confers the intelligence needed to make that interest effective in practice” (p. 366). For Dewey, an “occupation” describes any sustained undertaking inside or outside school, from interpreting a story to building a dam, that draws out intelligent action in communicative association with others. The moral aspect stands out when this analysis wedges with his previous argument (p. 43) that building dams, operating transportation systems, and engaging in all the other productive doings of a would-be civilized society should draw not on technical mastery alone but on communicated values regarding how to enhance the lives of all. Moral knowledge fuses technical know-how with social consciousness.

Dewey’s concluding studies of philosophy, knowledge, and the moral, which I have only touched on in this all-too-brief synopsis, constitute a

fitting bookend with his preface and his initial reflections on the idea of renewal in chapter 1. In his preface he had anticipated undertaking “a critical estimate” of historic and still influential theories of knowledge and morality. As we have seen, for Dewey questions about knowledge and the moral ultimately derive from, and ultimately must feed back into, educational problems and needs. This perspective sheds light on why he had selected as the title for his book, “An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education.” Dewey’s entire book embodies the meaning he ascribes to philosophy, beginning with his verbs “endeavor,” “detect,” “state,” and the like, and concluding with his still timely criticism of the meaning of moral education. For Dewey, no education can be moral unless it cultivates the capacity to criticize intelligently. Effective, humane methods of inquiry and communication are so vital in his outlook that it may not be accidental that his analysis of method, in chapter 13, resides literally in the center of the book. It is no coincidence that his discussion of philosophy, knowledge, and the moral come after the bulk of the project has been completed, for his sense of them springs from the experience of inquiry rather than predetermining its trajectory and outcome.

In between his preface and conclusion, in his role as a philosopher Dewey criticizes numerous past and contemporary ideas and practices. They all stand or fall depending on whether they serve the essential, one might say universe-all need of renewal. As Dewey argues, the very meaning of renewal deepens in both complexity and urgency the more a society aspires toward democratic growth. In making this case, Dewey does not shy away from calling into question ideals and customs his contemporaries revere. But he never questions the fundamental need for reverence. Dewey’s sense of reverence for human possibility and his achievement in expressing it in *Democracy and Education* remain unsurpassed in the history of writing on education.

Organization of this Book

I have sketched in rapid strokes possible answers to the question What is *Democracy and Education*? Among other things, the book is a philosophical inquiry, a vision of education, a critique of Dewey’s contemporary society, and a judgment on the significance of the history of ideas in and for human life. In the chapters ahead, the contributors to this volume provide substantive, panoramic, and provocative perspectives of their own. They do not always see eye to eye with one another, nor will readers accept all of their claims. However, the diversity of themes they take up from Dewey’s book, their interpretive standpoints, and their styles and modes of writing, reveal how comprehensive and unfathomable Dewey’s

educational reach is. The contributors attest to the truth in Jaspers' terms, applied to *Democracy and Education*, that it is "shot through" with generative ideas, insights, and questions.

The sequence of chapters parallels, in a rough fashion, the sequence of topics Dewey takes up in *Democracy and Education*. The contributors have been asked to stay close to Dewey's text, even while touching on other writings by Dewey as well as secondary sources to make their arguments. They have also been encouraged to link their analyses of Dewey's claims with contemporary educational concerns and problems. The latter encompass what the curriculum for children and youth should be, how to organize and implement formal teacher education, what modes of pedagogy are most sensible given societal if not global trends, and how to think about the purposes of school. These issues constitute our educational prospect today.

In chapter 2, Gert Biesta focuses on what he regards as the centrality of communication in Dewey's philosophy of education. Biesta traces the intellectual origins of Dewey's ideas on communication, and argues that they make their first pivotal appearance in the pages of *Democracy and Education*. Biesta describes Dewey's emphasis on communication, rather than on learning, as a "revolutionary" conception of education. Dewey looks beyond discrete theories of learning and instruction to a larger tableau, wherein human beings express and cultivate their humanity through a wide tapestry of communicative modes. Biesta provides a response to a long-standing question about the book, especially among teachers, as to why Dewey makes so little *direct* mention of teachers and teaching. Rather than centering education around the teacher, or around the student for that matter, Dewey places communication at the core, or so Biesta contends. Especially in working with children and youth, it is through the medium of the educational environments teachers set up that they exert their strongest influence. Rather than flowing directly from teacher to student, pedagogical influence flows into environments that fuel communication, consistently and persistently, such that students experience situations that challenge them to learn rather than merely go through the motions or mimic the teacher.

In chapter 3, Reba N. Page takes up Dewey's conception of curriculum in order to examine how he treats the relation between formal and informal education—a major theme in the early chapters of *Democracy and Education*. Like Dewey, Page does not underplay how tenuous the relation often turns out to be. It is not simply a matter of fine-tuning pedagogical methods or curricular content. The distinction between the formal and the informal points to fundamental aspects of human experience, of how unpredictable, disjointed, surprising, and confounding it

can turn out to be. The distinction underscores why education and schooling are not synonyms, and why school is a place where informal education occurs as surely as does formal tuition. In developing her argument, Page draws on an array of examples, from her young daughter's reaction to first noticing the moon to Eleanor Duckworth's widely cited approaches to teaching science, in which she also draws upon the moon as an object of interest. Page shines a light on why Dewey regarded curriculum planning as difficult, challenging, and utterly indispensable, even as he appreciated how the best laid plans can both go awry and yield unanticipated benefits.

Larry A. Hickman, in chapter 4, elucidates the distinctive meaning Dewey attaches to three closely related, core terms in *Democracy and Education*: socialization, social efficiency, and social control. Hickman takes up each concept in turn, showing how it adds to Dewey's overall picture of educational and democratic life. Each term captures an element in why both education and democracy are interactive and interpersonal processes. They are not means to some distant ends. For example, social control does not imply a top-down, authoritarian structure. Rather, for Dewey, control emerges through communication, interaction, and conjoint attempts to resolve problems and create structures of meaning and satisfaction. Genuine social control resides *in* these processes, such that people learn to adapt to change, as well as instigate it, in ways that do not lead to violence or chaotic disorder. Dewey makes a similarly creative move with concepts of socialization and social efficiency, whose meanings also derive from the democratic criterion he articulates in the book. Hickman contrasts these views with contemporary conceptions of efficiency and control that he regards as narrow and constraining on our educational prospects.

In chapter 5, Naoko Saito reconstructs Dewey's widely admired and widely criticized concept of growth. Saito shows how the concept brings to a head, in a culminating, consummatory manner, many educators' deep intuitions regarding the distinctiveness and humanity of each student. In addition, Dewey's way of characterizing the idea of growth makes not just ample but essential room in teaching and learning for the imaginative, the creative, and the constructive, rather than solely for rote learning. However, Saito also makes plain how widely criticized Dewey's concept has been because of its alleged emptiness. When Dewey claims that the purpose of growth is further growth, some critics reply that the claim begs the fundamental question, Growth toward what or for what? Saito draws on Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of perfectionism, as well as Stanley Cavell's trenchant remarks on that notion, to reconceive how we might regard the idea of growth. She argues that Emerson's thought

helps retain the nonfoundational character of growth that was important to Dewey, since he viewed preordained outcomes of education as problematic. He insisted that part of the educational process is learning to criticize education itself. At the same time, Saito presents a case for why an Emersonian take on growth can also rescue the idea from the charge of being an empty concept.

Gary D. Fenstermacher argues, in chapter 6, that *Democracy and Education* constitutes a powerful reminder about the centrality of the student in education. Even though the book does not always explicitly place the student in the forefront, Fenstermacher shows how Dewey highlights the student's agency and the need for educators to respect that agency. Dewey regards students as purposive beings who merit substantive autonomy in fashioning their educational experience. Students are capable of enhancing their own being through exercising their agency, intentionality, reasoning, and more, in the work of education. Fenstermacher contrasts this focus on Dewey's part with contemporary educational policy and research, which in his view remains virtually silent about the student-as-agent, or student-as-full-human-being. Instead, much of today's policy and research pivots around things that should be done *to* students. *Democracy and Education* illuminates the vibrant agency of students, and, for Fenstermacher, reading the book provides a penetrating view on how educators can restore a focus on the student in the discourses of policy and research.

Herbert M. Kliebard begins chapter 7 by reminding us that no school has ever existed without having something to teach. He points out that Dewey, in founding and directing the famed Laboratory School in Chicago in the 1890s, turned to his contemporaries for answers to the primordial question, What should we teach? He was satisfied with none of the theories he came upon. Through analysis and criticism of those extant positions, he began to forge his own. Kliebard concentrates on chapters 13–15 in *Democracy and Education* to elucidate how Dewey develops his distinctive outlook. He traces the movement of Dewey's thought through those chapters, which focus, respectively, on method, subject matter, and the relation between play and work. Kliebard concludes that while Dewey's educational philosophy embodies both deep integrity and persuasive power, it failed to influence in any fundamental or enduring way American schooling. The system has proven to be intractable, Kliebard contends, and has relegated to its margins and interstices Deweyan approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. Nonetheless, he implies that a permanent value in studying *Democracy and Education* is that it challenges conventional assumptions and practices, serving in a metaphorical sense as a textual, Socratic gadfly stinging the body politic into awareness.

In chapter 8, Sharon Feiman-Nemser examines *Democracy and Education* through the eyes of a teacher educator. She elucidates Dewey's concept of education as "the reconstruction of experience" and considers what that concept implies for the education of teachers. She also contrasts this take on teacher education with what the latter would look like if approached through two classic theories of learning that Dewey criticizes, namely, education as preparation and as unfolding from within. In the second part of her chapter, Feiman-Nemser considers two proposals for the reform of teacher education, written one hundred years apart, which she presents as different embodiments of Dewey's core ideas. The first, written by Dewey himself, takes theory as its starting point. The second, written by Deborah Ball and David Cohen, situates professional education "in" practice. Both proposals share a commitment to fostering an investigative stance toward teaching and both embrace the reconstruction rather than the reproduction of experience in learning to teach.

Elizabeth Minnich, in chapter 9, sketches a portrait of Dewey's philosophy of life that she finds expressed throughout the pages of *Democracy and Education*. Minnich examines primordial notions of reproduction and renewal, the latter a term Dewey himself takes up. These two notions differ from replication; both reproduction and renewal point to transformation within continuity. Minnich suggests that the terms illuminate why we might conceive life as, in her words, adaptive, co-creative, and communicatively reproductive. In this process, relation is central—relation between persons and world, and between persons and other people. Relation makes possible individuation, just as dependence makes possible independence. Dewey emphasizes that societal presuppositions about the supposed weakness implied by the idea of dependence can lead to confusion about the educational process. For Dewey, dependence signals the very possibility of relation with others and the world, and thus the emergence of genuine individuality and the best meanings embedded in the treasured term independence. Minnich infuses her argument with several examples from her teaching, in order to interpret why the idea of experience figures so prominently in Dewey's philosophy of life.

In the final chapter, I take up the question why Dewey closes his book by bequeathing readers an image of the moral self. I suggest that the image has its origins in Emerson's idea of "reception," which resides at the core of the latter's vision of what it means to become a human being. With this background in place, I examine how and why Dewey fuses the concepts of self and "interest." That fusion mirrors his book-length criticism of theories, and the social practices he associates with them, that separate mind from body, individual from society, and school from life. Dewey argues that self and interest are two names for the same

fact, namely, that the self literally becomes a self only through engagement in the world. In the final chapter of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey employs these ideas as well as others he has articulated to criticize moral theories and schemes of moral education predicated upon them. As an outcome of his critique, the fusion of self and interest metamorphoses into an image of the moral self. The concept of the moral—the very last concept Dewey examines in his epic inquiry—becomes crucial in elucidating the kind of education, and the kind of person, Dewey imagines grows from and makes possible a democratic life.

Conclusion: Dewey and the Teacher's Legacy

In a recent essay on what it means to be a teacher, George Steiner writes that “there have been, there are, great American teachers: Ralph Waldo Emerson, first and foremost, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Charles Eliot Norton, John Dewey, Martha Graham” (2003, p. 124). Steiner means that these figures not only were personal influences on many others, but that their work—as expressed, for example, in their writing—was educative, edifying, and pedagogical in structure and overtone. That description fits *Democracy and Education*. Dewey's publishers had asked for a textbook for teachers, but he gave them much more. He produced a book that teaches, even as it articulates from Dewey's point of view the elements of an education in and for a democratic society. Readers may not accept his lessons, and they may disagree with his methods. However, they can only reach those judgments by entering the inquiry with him. In so doing, they put themselves in a position to learn—to grow. They may even learn lessons about how to grow in ways that deepen the impulse to inquire and to learn. Dewey would contend that that process also holds the promise of their developing their democratic dispositions. Democracy implies interaction, not agreement. According to Dewey, it implies like-mindedness, which he characterizes as a willingness and an ability to communicate, but it does not imply identical-mindedness.

As the previous section forecasts, the chapters ahead address many features of Dewey's argument and vision in *Democracy and Education*. The authors make plain the continued power and pertinence of the book, even while raising many questions about it. In rereading the text as part of their preparation to write their chapters, the authors also make clear what they have learned this time around. Their example attests to the living quality of the book. Every return to it can generate new layers of meaning about life and education, new layers of questioning regarding one's contemporary times, new ways of arguing with Dewey, and more.

That outcome triggers the question, What future is there for *Democracy and Education*? Will people who care about education continue to turn to it? The contributors to this volume attest to how original and majestic the book remains and to how helpful it is in criticizing the current educational scene. However, it is not clear that the field of education will continue to engage its traditions, of which Dewey is a part, in a serious, thoughtful way. The explosion of information in the world today, the rapidity of interaction via contemporary modes of communication, the continued blurring of the lines between providing education and offering marketable degrees and diplomas: these and other forces conspire to push educators into a mode of incessant busyness, with increasingly scarce time for the solitude and the conversation so indispensable for thoughtful study and reflection. Such accelerated circumstances generate professional amnesia and, as a consequence, uninformed and unrooted attachment to passing educational theories and programs. The fact that genuine education continues to take place, at all levels of the system, attests to the underlying quest for meaning and purpose that animates many teachers and students. That quest must compete today with an intense array of pressures that militate against its realization.

Educators need not read their traditions eulogistically, as if turning to Dewey is like sitting in on the weekly sermon, or standing to honor the flag during the seventh inning stretch. On the contrary, to read tradition critically is to reanimate, revitalize, and redirect it (Hansen, 2001, pp. 114–156). It is to gain precious distance both from the impulse toward traditionalism—the uncritical embrace of the past—and from the demands of the pressing present. The aim is not to escape or withdraw from the latter but to hold it up against a broader backdrop than it is itself capable of providing. Only the engagement with tradition can make possible this critical distance; there is no other way. The attempt to reject tradition and start over from scratch is merely a guaranteed method of hardening present assumptions about what is good, proper, appropriate, needed, and so forth. The critical engagement with tradition, of which this entire volume is an enactment, puts the spotlight on what is at stake in considerations about the purposes of education.

Dewey once wrote, in words that ended up on his headstone where he is buried in Vermont, “The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared

than we have received it” (LW.9.57–58). What does Dewey mean by the remarkable fusion of terms such as conserving, transmitting, rectifying, and expanding? How can a process of conserving simultaneously be one of expanding? How can transmitting cohere with rectifying? What does Dewey intend by linking terms such as “prizing,” “grace,” “heritage,” and “values”? One approach to answering these questions is to read or re-read *Democracy and Education*. Any person who takes up that task positions him- or herself to better understand the indispensability of tradition for any meaningful educational scheme. Without traditions of thought and practice, people would be tongue-tied and unable to withstand the latest craze that clamors for attention. Part of engaging tradition is reading it sympathetically, mindful of Dewey’s reminder of what all people owe to their precursors. The other part of the process is reading it critically, and here the challenge, the joy, the frustration, and the accomplishment derive from confronting what it means to “rectify” that which has harmed humanity and to “expand” that which has enhanced its prospect. If the present volume contributes to the reconstruction of educational tradition, in the form of continued critical attention to *Democracy and Education*, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

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