John Dewey's New Humanism and Liberal Education for the 21st Century

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This paper contains excerpts from an unpublished commencement speech given by John Dewey at Illinois College in June of 1917. Buried within the reels of microfilm in the archives of the local public library, two moving paragraphs—all that may exist of the speech—have slept silently for 85 years. Like a time capsule waiting to be opened, Dewey’s message to the graduates of 1917 seems to have anticipated the ethical problems and concerns of the modern age. In the spring of 1917, Dewey was speaking to a group of young adults facing a world torn by the horrors of WWI. Today, we can read his address as a prophetic warning to a world stricken with terrorism, where suicide bombers, bio-warfare, chemical pollution, and the possibility of human clones threaten to destroy life as we know it. It is the aim of this paper to bring Dewey’s message into the light of the 21st century and to show its relevance and value for modern educational thought.

Dewey admonishes the younger generation that the great aim in life is not only to improve the mind, but also to use knowledge for the welfare of others. He calls for a “New Humanism,” where scientific knowledge is used for the ‘uplift’ of mankind, not for the destructive forces of war. He draws philosophically on Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis, which pictures a utopian world in which men of science deal not in jewels or gold, but in ‘light,’ and all research is done for the betterment of mankind. Dewey forecasts a time when self-knowledge will guide humanity to the moral use of nature, and progress will mean peace for the world.

The extant text of Dewey’s 1917 commencement speech is as follows:

The New Humanism

Centuries ago Bacon heralded a new epoch for mankind when men would seek to make common cause, without opposing each other in wasteful wars and vain contests. For a time all seemed to go well but mankind was not ready for such an era. Physical science has been studied and its resources used to the utmost in devising means of destruction. All the forces and possessions of nature have been requisitioned for war when we compare the present with the prophecies of Bacon. Humanity is not aided by the invention of means of destruction. Humanity is helpless in the presence of the weapons of warfare. There are no gross forms of chattel slavery today but the forces of steam and electricity have aided some men to gain great power over their fellow men. Human beings seem to be almost stupefied in using nature. Man has not found enough regarding himself. Many have lacked the courage to use the forces of nature as they should.

Uplifting Humanity

It is the work of education to accomplish this. Man’s knowledge of himself must decide what use he will make of his knowledge. The young should remember that their great aim should be the uplift of humanity. The value of the resources of nature lies in the extent to which they are used for the welfare of man. The time will come when men will look back on the present and wonder how or why the knowledge of science was not used for the welfare of mankind. What can the colleges do to train the young best to serve their fellow men? Education should not be so practical; so devoted to gains that the great object in life is obscured. Do lawyers strive to serve their fellow men as they should? Are the efforts of all in authority; of all enjoying the best in life used for the betterment of the race? If education tends to improve the mind and lead the ones enjoying it to altruistic efforts then it will not be in vain. This will be grand and an era of good will for mankind will be ushered in.

Having come into philosophy of education late in my teaching career, discovering a passion for it, and then finding this lost tidbit of Deweyana, I felt I must write something that would reaffirm the wisdom of Dewey’s address and connect it with my teaching. I wanted to gain an understanding of what Dewey was thinking in 1917 and to try to make his words meaningful for myself, my students, and others who have an appreciation for memorable moments lost in time and an interest in promoting a better world through education. To that end, in writing this paper, I have used material from some of Dewey’s publications in the year in which he gave this speech and the year prior to it, in order to support what I believe to be the philosophy he expounded in this address. I present the extant text in segments of related thought, alternating them with my own reflections and material from Dewey’s writings and others whose thoughts supported or provided insight into Dewey’s philosophical viewpoint.
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Dewey began his address with a reflection on the writings of Francis Bacon, a person to whom he referred often in his many volumes of published work. Bacon bridged the end of the Renaissance with the beginning of the Enlightenment, abandoning the Old World learning for the quest of the unknown, uncharted scientific world. In Bacon's House of Salomon, the monkish “fathers” have knowledge of the world, ancient and present. These wise men are scientists with humanitarian morals and values. They represent Renaissance Humanism, yet they operate within a model research community. Dewey was intrigued with Bacon's vision of a marriage between scientific method and a humanitarian society, which he incorporated into his own philosophy. In Democracy and Education, Dewey wrote:

Francis Bacon presents an almost perfect example of the union of naturalistic and humanistic interest. Science, adopting the methods of observation and experimentation, was to give up the attempt to “anticipate” nature—to impose preconceived notions upon her—and to become her humble interpreter. In obeying nature intellectually man would learn to command her practically. . . . Men were to give up their futile, never-finished effort to dominate one another to engage in the cooperative task of dominating nature in the interests of humanity.

The last sentence is the key to Dewey's humanistic theme: Knowledge of nature and the use of it must be guided by humanitarian purposes. Dewey's use of the word “domination” sounds heavy-handed to the modern reader. However, I would argue that Dewey used the word “dominating” for literary effect, to show emphasis and contrast, rather than to indicate or (to suggest) that mankind should impose a forceful hand upon nature. In 1916, Dewey had written, “We do not of course wholly control the energies of nature; we shall never wholly do so.” Dewey's idea was not so much to dominate, as to work in cooperation with nature in order to bring about progress for the human race. Dewey saw all too clearly, as the United States moved in World War I, the direction in which new scientific energy was being channeled. He had hoped that the scientific method would be used for a worthwhile task, one that would move civilization forward cooperatively. Steven C. Rockefeller in Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism, affirms this point:

It is one of Dewey's deepest convictions that only when the experimental method is humanized and applied to the values that govern human relations will the destructive consequences of the new technology be overcome. Thus in Dewey's mind is the real problem of science and moral values.

Physical science has been studied and its resources used to the utmost in devising means of destruction. All the forces and possessions of nature have been requisitioned for war when we compare the present with the prophecies of Bacon.

Returning again to Bacon's prophecy in Democracy and Education, Dewey recalled "through the new method of thought which was to set forth in his [Bacon's] new logic, an era of expansive discoveries was to emerge and these discoveries to be bear fruit in inventions for the service of man." In Bacon's utopian world, the fathers in the House of Salomon explore and manipulate nature within a scientific community that is "dedicated to the study of the works and creatures of God." Dewey was forced to acknowledge the contrast between Bacon's imaginary model of a harmonious world and his own unstable civilization. For Dewey, as for us now, the reality of the self-interest and perversity of war was staggering.

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Dewey was a witness to the fact that all the efforts of society and science were being channeled into the war cause. He was horribly aware that his hopes for humanity's progress through the advance of science were not being realized. In an essay entitled, "Progress," written in 1916, Dewey wrote:

We were told that the advance of science had made war practically impossible. We now know that science has not only rendered the engineering of war more deadly, but has also increased the powers of resistance and endurance when war comes. Has man subjugated physical nature only to release forces beyond his control?

As history has regrettably proven, those in control of scientific knowledge have not always used their power for the betterment of humanity. Barbara Tuchman, in The Guns of August, described the devastation caused by the German march through Belgium in World War I and commented on the inhumanity of the practice of using reprisals, where people were killed and villages burned for no other reason than to create fear and terror in the people: "This practice of the principle of collective responsibility, having been expressly outlawed by the Hague Convention, shocked the world of 1914 which had believed in human progress." 10

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Dewey was concerned that science had created an industrial society where many were slaves to the few, where wealth meant power, and human suffering was not abated. Those in power were making choices, and moral precepts or humanitarian concerns did not guide the choices. Dewey turned again to Bacon when explaining the effects of science on society:
Dewey turned to education as the vehicle for accomplishing his vision of a better world, which would be guided by democratic principles. In 1916, he wrote: “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” He believed that education planted and nurtured the intellectual and emotional traits of a social and moral democracy. Dewey’s almost naïve optimism is evident in his work of this period; his larger vision is that democracy will lead...
the world and show the way to a peaceful resolution of the war. However, my reading of this particular piece is that Dewey was beginning to doubt the rationality of war as a means of bringing about peace, and certainly he was appalled at the uses of technology for destructive purposes.

The value of the resources of nature lies in the extent to which they are used for the welfare of man. The time will come when men will look back on the present and wonder how or why the knowledge of science was not used for the welfare of mankind.

There is a tendency to read into these reflections, a negative attitude toward scientific research. I want to make it clear that this is not my intention, and I am sure it was not John Dewey’s. Dewey had the idea that the future could be controlled and modified by scientific means and method. He believed that science was “knowledge at its best, knowledge in its tested and surest form.” Dewey was very sure of the greatness, usefulness, and goodness of scientific knowledge. “For the first time in history,” he wrote in 1916, “mankind is in command of the possibility of progress. The rest is for us to say.”

Paul Strathern, author of Mendeleyev’s Dream, suggests that a naïve optimism had existed prior to the late twentieth century in regard to the direction that science was leading us:

Only in the latter part of the twentieth century did we shed the last remnants of our belief in science as a moral force for the good. And even today, when society depends more than ever upon science, we still find it difficult to accept that science itself is morally neutral. It is only human action, which invests science with the power for good or evil—utilizing it to create a cure for AIDS or for cloning Saddam Hussein.

What can the colleges do to train the young best to serve their fellow men? Education should not be so practical; so devoted to gains that the great object in life is obscured. Do lawyers strive to serve their fellow men as they should? Are the efforts of all in authority, of all enjoying the best in life used for the betterment of the race?

In an essay entitled, “The Modern Trend Toward Vocational Education in Its Effect upon the Professional and Non-Professional Studies of the University,” Dewey argued for an infusion of humanism in professional education: “For the humanism of today can be adequately expressed only in a vision of the social possibilities of the intelligence and learning embodied in the great modern enterprises of business, law, medicine, education, farming, engineering, etc.” Education must not be for the sole purpose of preparing young men and women for professions; its purpose must be to teach young people the art of understanding and empathy, to teach collaboration and care, to teach tolerance and sensitivity, and to give meaning to life. This was Dewey’s great objective that must not be obscured by self-interest or personal gain. In

Democracy and Education Dewey explained, “Knowledge is humanistic in quality not because it is about human products of the past, but because of what it does in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy.”

As the 21st century unfolds, and the world continues to come to more and more a global community, Dewey’s idea of the “New Humanism” in liberal education can provide a philosophical model for modern educators. Dewey would have teachers focus their aims on the liberating qualities of learning, helping students find ways to create conversations that lead to peace in our communities and throughout the world. The point of gaining knowledge, whether it be in the sciences, the humanities, or professional programs, must be to enable young people to become citizens of the world, in a world free of prejudice, hatred, and selfishness. As Dewey so beautifully stated it for the graduating class of 1917:

If education tends to improve the mind and lead the ones enjoying it to altruistic effort then it will not be in vain. This will be grand and an era of good will for mankind will be ushered in.

Works Cited


—— “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy.” The Middle Works. 139.

—— “The Modern Trend Toward Professional Education.” The Middle Works. 156.

—— “Progress.” The Middle Works. 234.


Endnotes


2. John Dewey, "The New Humanism," excerpts published in the *Jacksonville Daily Journal*, Thursday, 14 June 1917, p. 5. It is not known whether the text published in the local newspaper is the speech in its entirety or excerpts from the original text. For the purposes of this paper, I have treated the extant text as a complete document. I have reproduced it here as it was printed in the newspaper without making any changes in the punctuation or paragraphing.

3. Dewey was most probably referring to Bacon's *New Atlantis*.


12. Ibid. 338-9.


14. Ibid., 689.


