John Dewey’s 1937 Lectures in Philosophy and Education

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John Dewey's most intense period of work in philosophy of education during and immediately after the Chicago years culminated in *Democracy and Education* in 1916. After that, he produced fewer writings on education, but is still remembered for *The Sources of a Science of Education, Experience and Education*, and numerous articles in journals. Yet the longest account of philosophy of education after *Democracy and Education* is little known. This is a course of lectures on educational philosophy given at the University of Cincinnati in 1937, two decades after *Democracy and Education*. A stenographic record of the lectures was made, which consists of 237 double-spaced typewritten pages. Two earlier sets of lectures in philosophy of education have survived — one given in 1896, the other in 1899. (The 1896, 1899, and 1937 lectures will be referenced as L1, L2, and L3, respectively.) The 1937 course was intensive: Dewey lectured for 5 days a week for two weeks in the 1937 Summer School, one lecture a day on two days, two lectures on each of the remaining 8 days, for a total of 18 lectures, June 7 to June 11, and June 14 to June 18. (For purposes of reference, the lectures are numbered 1-18; e.g., L3,15 means the 1937 lectures, lecture 15. The division into sub-headings was made by the present writer.)

One change that had taken place since 1916 was the growth of philosophy of education as a distinct field of study in the United States. Prior to 1916, Herman Harrell Home's *Philosophy of Education* in 1904 was probably the first textbook by an American author. This was followed by John Angus Macvannel's *Outline of a Course in the Philosophy of Education* and G. E. Partridge's *Genetic Philosophy of Education*, both published in 1912. Other writers had entered the scene whose writings were on Dewey's reading list in 1937. Among them were W. H. Kilpatrick's *Education for a Changing Civilization*, Boyd H. Bode's *Modern Educational Theories*, and John Childs' *Education and the Philosophy of Experimentalism*.

Perhaps the most striking difference between L3, on the one side, and L1, L2, and *Democracy and Education* on the other, can be seen in the place devoted to a discussion of philosophy and philosophy of education. In L1 and L2 Dewey pays little direct attention to discussing the nature of philosophy of education but may be said to "do" philosophy of education; while in *Democracy and Education* he "does" philosophy of education for 23 chapters, then discusses the nature of its subject matter in Chapter 24 in relation to philosophy itself. However, in 1937, he begins the course by devoting the first lecture to the nature of philosophy and the second to the nature of philosophy of education. He explains this way of beginning the course by saying, "I suppose it ought to begin with something a little more concrete, but this preliminary discussion about philosophy in general, the philosophy of education in particular, seemed to be rather necessary, sort of a framework for the course." About his preliminary discussion, Dewey advises the students not to take it too seriously but, at the same time, "don't forget about it." It is to be used in later discussions "to go back to to be filled out." "After all," he says, "it is philosophy in its bearings upon educational problems that I am going to discuss."

In beginning his discussion of the nature of philosophy, Dewey asks what there is about philosophy that is not futile, not a purely...
intellectual exercise, and replies that philosophizing is a form of reflective thought that comes about in response to social problems. The further question to explore is why are there problems that require philosophic inquiry distinct from scientific inquiry?

Generally speaking, Dewey holds, philosophy arises in a conflict between well-ingrained customs, traditions, and institutions in a social group, and new or unaccustomed ways of responding to those ingrained customs. When settled conditions continue for long periods and become fairly static, there is little philosophizing; when different beliefs or changes in conditions are introduced, old static conditions become unsettled, and problems arise. Philosophy is made up of attempts to mediate between the previously settled and the now unsettled.

Whatever is customary, traditional, settled in a group Dewey calls the common sense of the group. It is what "the different members of the group take for granted, that is, what they accept without much thought, accept it because it is there . . . all the members of the group are influenced by it, tend to hold it in common." Put differently, the beliefs that are held in common are the "sense" of the group. The impact of modern science has had an unsettling impact on what was earlier common sense. Dewey contrasts his conception of philosophy as seeking action that aims to mediate between the previously settled common sense and that which unsettles common sense, with conceptions of philosophy that "attempt to get a final ultimate absolute knowledge of the universe as a complete whole." He has little to say about the conceptions that attempt to gain "final ultimate absolute knowledge."

Finally, in his opening lecture Dewey turns to the question, Why do we need philosophy, since the development of the sciences would probably make philosophy extinct. Yet there is more in life than knowledge, Dewey says -- there is living itself. And an important part of living is the raising of questions about what to do with knowledge. For example, "we need human beings that have to form principles and aims and that have to change the value of this end over against that purpose . . . that have aims in life both as individuals and as groups." In short, philosophy deals with the question of aims and values. "Philosophy in my mind can never be merged in science just because of the fact that as human beings we are moved to action, not by knowledge alone but by knowledge in connection with our desires, aims, purposes, and conceptions of what is worthwhile."

The Nature of Philosophy of Education

In L3.2 Dewey moves from a discussion of philosophy to philosophy of education. He thinks that education is more intimately connected with the social conditions from which philosophy emerges than any other institution. He refers to Chapter 24 in Democracy and Education where the nature of philosophy of education is discussed, pointing out that philosophy in its origins in ancient Greece was connected closely with educational problems. "Education," he says, "is the chief social instrumentality for forming a type of human beings that carry on the beliefs and traditions of a community." He goes on to refer to two facts in juxtaposition with one another: (1) the conservative character of the school; and (2) the changes in social conditions that have forced themselves onto the schools. This shows, he argues, that schools have had to face the problem of the adjustment of older types of schools, subject matters, and methods to changing social conditions. At the same time, new subject matters tend to become dispersive, leading to the need to find ways of unifying them. The task of philosophy of education is to reflect on the
existing situation and attempt to locate and describe the sources of the conflict out of which problems arise, and then to form ideas of ways in which unity may be brought about. "First," he says, "to see the school situation in the light of the larger social situation, and then secondly to form an idea of the way in which the school may serve better in the direction of social forces and conditions in solving the social problems."

Going on to say that this is "a general formal statement," Dewey attempts to make it more concrete by talking about what philosophy of education can and cannot do for the teacher. What it cannot do, Dewey says, is to give teachers "practical recipes" for teaching better. What it should do "is to enable the teacher or the school administrator to see the special tasks of school work in a larger and longer perspective, take them out of the narrow day by day setting and place them in some kind of a larger intellectual and moral scheme, enlarge the horizon, broaden the context, the sense of the context in which these detailed questions and problems arise." He illustrates this idea by discussing a "conflict of ends and values between the specific and the general." He refers to Bode and Kilpatrick who emphasize the development of "attitudes" or "dispositions" as being a more important aim than acquiring specific information. Yet Dewey points out that it is important not to oppose these aims to one another; rather we need to understand that concrete skills and bodies of information are means for the creation of general attitudes.

Eventually Dewey discusses another conflict that results in a philosophical problem -- the relation between theory and practice. He notes that much popular literature connects "practical" education with being successful in one's occupation, and tends to connect "practical" with "useful." Instead, Dewey argues for "the necessity of broadening the concept of practice and practical to include different factors, human well being, human welfare."

The Theoretical and the Practical: Relating Child and Curriculum

In L3, Dewey considers the relationship between the theoretical and the practical. He acknowledges the common tendency to separate theory and practice, a dualism that Dewey wants us to get over. "The most fundamental problem in life," he says, "individually and collectively, is to relate theory and practice so that practice is intelligent, embodies ideas that are broad and comprehensive as possible, while ideas, theories, beliefs . . . organize, unify our practical activities." Dewey mentions some of the "splits" in education: between subjects held to be good for intellectual discipline and those that are held to be of practical value; between the "vocational" and the "academic"; between "pure" and "applied" science; and between the "humanistic" and the "scientific."

In this context Dewey returns to his earlier point that one task of philosophy of education is to locate conflicts that cause problems that education needs to face; or that reflective thinking "is investigation, examination, turning things over, and we don't inquire excepting where there is a question." What philosophy of education can do for us is to make us more aware of underlying problems.

Dewey raises the question, what is education? He responds by saying that he is not going to try and give a definition of education at this point, holding that valuable definitions come at the close of a discussion; they are conclusions of inquiry, rather than beginnings. The present discussion of what education is is not "an attempt to give a final definition but rather to indicate some of the factors that enter into it in a way that gives a kind of outline map, a series of pointer signs." Then he discusses two related factors at length. The first is that education is a process of motivating individuals' original natures and tendencies. Beginning with babies' "normal tendencies" education must build on them, "to modify them, to give them a turn, a direction they don't have originally and don't
have when they are left to themselves." Thus Dewey makes explicit the idea that children cannot be "left to themselves," but need the help of persons of more mature experience. The second and related factor in educating the young is that "giving direction to them leads to certain results -- takes the form of habit formation." Dewey tries to make it clear that what he means by this is a wide sense of habit, that which includes habits of desire, of purpose, of judgment. The aim is for such habits to lead youngsters to be able to judge what is appropriate or inappropriate in certain situations. These are more important than merely "external" ways of behaving, for they are the consequence of internalizing ways of feeling and thinking.

With respect to the acquisition of special skills, such as in language and arithmetic, Dewey argues that these are more meaningful if they are acquired as part of activities of desiring, having purposes, and making judgments than if they are memorized apart from such activities.

Dewey's refusal to give a definition of education in favor of introducing certain "factors" is a departure from L1, L2, and Democracy and Education. In all three he defined education as the reconstruction of experience: In L1, L2 as a point of departure for the rest of the lectures; in L2, following a lecture in which he discussed interest, discipline, information, and culture; and in Democracy and Education in the chapter on "Education as Conservative and Progressive," where he emphasizes the idea that the character of education that reconstruction of experience requires is fundamentally different in conservative and progressive societies.

In L3,4 Dewey returns to a matter introduced on the previous day, about teachers giving direction to children's original tendencies. The point is that we have to pay attention to them, attempt to find out "what the pupil brings with him that the teacher may utilize, and ... how they are to be developed and transformed." In the course of this discussion Dewey refers to his earlier The Child and the Curriculum, pointing out that it is the business of the teacher to view students' existing habits, skills, and knowledge as potentialities, as "powers that are to be put to use." The teacher's problem "is to bring about an interaction ... between the powers which the pupil brings with him which includes all of his interests, all of his habits, skills, knowledge and thought ... or at least that part of him which is relevant to the particular subject matter so that ... some kind of transaction takes place." In this way child-and-curriculum becomes a working relationship, not a mere "addition" of curriculum to child.

Cumulative Activity and Growth

In L3,6 Dewey comments on some of the references on his reading list, saying that it doesn't make much difference which books are read; the important thing is to make connections between them and the subject matter of his lectures. He points to Harold Rugg's Culture and Education in America and Rugg and Ann Shumaker's Child Centered Schools as being "partly in line with the general tendency of the lectures and partly in opposition." No doubt the opposition lay in their emphasis on "child-centered" schools as compared with Dewey's efforts to find a unity of child and society. In addition, he refers to works giving accounts of schools that attempted to carry out in practice some of the ideas in his lectures; among them are articles in the Progressive Education journal, his and Evelyn Dewey's Schools of Tomorrow, and the recently-published book on the University of Chicago Laboratory School, The Dewey School by Mayhew and Edwards. He says that Bode's Conflicting Psychologies of Learning is especially relevant to the connection between ideas already discussed and "the special problem of general training or transfer, carrying over from one subject to another." He approaches the problem by asking what intellectual conditions would provide a reason to expect transfer. His reply is, "if there is a certain developing
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continuous activity where the different . . . stages . . . are consciously related to an end in view." Dewey elaborates further on what he means by a cumulative activity, saying it is when one stage leads to the next and that is a consequence of what had gone before. It is when those engaged in the activity "consciously observe the relation of what they were doing at the successive stages to the final end" that we have reason to think that "general intelligence" has had a hand in the activity, and "transfer from the intellectual standpoint" has been involved. Summing up, "unless thinking and judgment enter into the problem of the activity there is no reason to expect any transfer," except by accident. Dewey says the cumulative activity of stimulus and response must be transformed into a means-consequences activity. This takes place when stimulus-response is not merely a consecutive reaction, but one in which observation of conditions and actions are consciously related to an end in view, and actions are deliberately performed as means to the consequences that are actually achieved.

Dewey's characterization of a means-consequences activity is a way of talking about growth. Dewey refers his students to an article by Bode, who criticized the conception of education as growth, by saying that it does not give any criterion for growth, inasmuch as a burglar can develop into a better burglar, a gangster can "grow" into a better gangster, and so on. Dewey asks whether this constitutes a fundamental objection to the idea of education as growth, or is something the matter with Bode's interpretation? The next day (L3,7) Dewey returns to Bode's objection, and begins by saying that "there is no such thing as one completely isolated line or mode of development." If we take the example of a burglar who has developed into a better burglar, we need to understand that it is difficult to imagine anyone who is nothing but a burglar. A burglar has potentialities to develop in other directions. "The real question," Dewey continues, "is whether growth, development in the direction of being a burglar will assist or retard the development in other directions." Development as the end cannot be limited to one line of growth. If development into a better burglar is the single end and it limits development in other directions -- e.g., becoming a better parent, or a better citizen -- "then that particular instance is not in accord with the idea that growth or development is the continual end." Dewey sums up his reply to Bode's criticism in this way: "If you really believe that growth or development is the end you have got to take it in a broad and inclusive sense and not limit it to one isolated line of development excluding the effect and the bearing of that upon development in other directions."

Dewey moves on to discuss "all-around development," by which he means, not the development of everything at the same time, but a continuing growth in which certain activities predominate at certain times, yet "limit on them falls into place" in ways such that they can become means to other developing activities. For example, "receptivity," instead of involving a passive attitude on the part of students, is "a necessary function which itself involves a kind of activity." As an example, he says that it requires activity to really listen to what other people are saying, to take in what they are saying. One who cannot do this limits his own growth. Reading is another example if the reader is receptive, has "what we call the open mind," a willingness to take in. In both examples, receptivity involves an activity of taking -- not a passive receiving but an active taking.

The Nature of Experience: Heredity and Environment

In L3,8 Dewey discusses the question, what is experience? He refers to the empirical movement in modern philosophy which developed in opposition to the rationalistic philosophy. Francis Bacon emphasized beginning with first hand experiences of sensations and observations over against general
participation and common activities by which educators establish a more democratic method of control. Democracy, Dewey insists, "is radical because of its insistence upon democratic means to attain democratic ends." The question arises, Suppose the democratic faith "becomes smitten," should it hope to win out in the long run by means of persuasion? Is it permissible for democracy to use force in a struggle with non-democracy? Dewey's reply is, "if one doesn't have an absolutistic philosophy then one couldn't be an absolutistic pacifist." Although democracy must emphasize methods of inquiry and persuasion, if the occasion arises, proponents of democracy will have to fight for their ideals.

Dewey then responds to the criticism that learning everything through experience "tends to weaken our imaginative faculty" by turning to a discussion of the place of art in experience. This turns on the question, Is art a "normal necessity" of growth of experience or is it an "expression"? Here Dewey reminds his class of appreciating the value of completing an experience, carrying it through to a consummatory end. In this sense the aesthetic element in experience "means simply that experiences have attained their fulfillment." Dewey uses two words, "artistic" and "esthetic"; the former he calls the active, doing side of experience, the latter the receptive and "going side" of experience. Yet while the two can be distinguished from one another, they cannot be separated in actual developing experience. Thus a natural termination of such an experience is art, "an expression of a full experience." This means that the artistic attitude and method are not confined to painting, sculpting, "fine" literature, and the like, but may be part of any sort of experience. Not only is an esthetic experience the completion of a course of prior experience, but it prepares us for subsequent experience.

At the end of L3,15 Dewey returns to the question of subject matter in its social dimension and its counterpart in individual experience. He says that children in the first grade bring some of the curriculum with them. By this he means that something in their past experience can be connected with school studies. The need for joining the social and individual in experience means that an essential task of the school is to connect the children's own experience (their already-existing "curriculum") with kinds of subject matter in school that are socially worth while.

Dewey takes up the topic of methods in L3,16. He points out that it is not really a new topic, being a kind of corollary to what has been said about experience in general, about the process of doing in relation to the self and environment; he aims to make a little more articulate some things that were said in passing with respect to other topics. The key to the nature of method can be found in observing what takes place "in any worthwhile experience," e.g., children in activities outside of school, adults at work in various occupations. An important thing is to look for suggestions that increase powers of observation and independence, rather than to look for "recipes" on method. The more articulate plan of method is found in scientific method, "tested method." It is the method of ordinary experience that has been refined and systematized with special reference to the end of increasing knowledge. Dewey refers to salient points in scientific method, beginning with "getting the problem"; then ideas of working on the problem grow out of past experience; and acting to test the ideas. Next he refers to an idea expressed earlier in the course, that "scientific knowledge by the action determines the problem of end and value" (emphasis is on problem). But knowledge in itself does not tell us what we are to put knowledge to doing, but requires a sort of activity, viz. philosophy, that "takes the best knowledge we have ... relates that to some general scheme of directive values and purposes; the ends themselves not being fixed but being worked out and developed in the light of the actual conditions." This means forming hypotheses and testing them in the light of available evidence.
Dewey is saying that a sharp line cannot be drawn between science and philosophy, inasmuch as the ideas philosophy suggests in light of the findings of science themselves need to be tried out, as far as conditions permit, according to scientific methods of inquiry. Thus science results in findings that require a valuing of them in terms of hypotheses about what they require of us; and in testing the hypotheses we generate further conclusions that need the attention of philosophical valuing. This is clearly another example of the idea of continuity of experience.

Individual and Social: Democracy as a Way of Life

In L3,17 Dewey addresses the relationship between the individual and the social, pointing out that certain theories find an opposition between them. Association, Dewey argues, is a basic category of existence, even below the human, below the biological level. When we consider human beings, we find that they are nurtured and developed as members of a community. The problem is not to put the individual and the social over against one another, inasmuch as social relations are inevitable, but to find out how to relate various individual gifts and capacities to them; and to find working relationships between different forms of social organization and individuals. Genuine individuality, Dewey argues, is itself a product of social organization. Individuality, in turn, reacts on social institutions and can aim to make differences in them.

Dewey emphasizes a point that he had discussed back in 1899 in School and Society. In earlier rural, pre-industrial conditions, children learned habits of responsibility and relationships between occupations of feeding, clothing, and sheltering and ways in which the products of those occupations affected social-individual life by observing and participating in the society’s occupations along with adults. Schools of the time tended to take up "academic work" which community activities did not engage in. Thus schools separated themselves from society by engaging in academic activities while largely ignoring those of the community. In the forty years between the beginning of the Laboratory School in Chicago and 1937, the percentage of children attending school and particularly the percentage continuing into secondary education had increased dramatically. Yet with increasing industrialization and urbanization, the values formerly learned by children participating in community activities found a smaller place in social life outside the school. At the same time, for the most part schools have not responded in ways such that they provide adequate ways of gaining such values. It is striking how Dewey’s argument in 1937 echoes that of L1, L2, School and Society, and the work of the Laboratory School. Here is the way he puts it in L3,17: "if the growing young are to get any first hand experience to a very large extent it is the school that has got to provide them, so that a good deal of the development of so-called industrial activities is not so much an immediate and direct industrial thing as it is to meet a larger human need of the individuals in getting the kind of education that the ordinary environment no longer supplies him."

In Dewey’s final lecture in the 1937 course, he discusses education explicitly from a democratic frame of reference. In contrast to those who think of democracy mainly as a political institution, Dewey calls it "a moral-social ideal," of which political democracy is one aspect. He quotes the title of Bode’s book, Democracy as a Way of Life, as indicative of his own view that political democracy is a means to a wider democracy as a way of life. He points out that equality of opportunity is a fundamental ideal in a democratic way of life. Noting the often-raised criticism of this ideal on the ground that people are not born equal inasmuch as heredity makes a difference, Dewey responds by saying that the advocates of the ideal of equality meant "that people ought to have equality of
opportunity no matter what the inequalities in their natural gifts are." Indeed, he adds, "the more certain it is that there is inequality of natural gifts, then the more reason there is for having equality of opportunity of development."

Dewey goes on to argue that the main advantage of political democracy "is that it is an educational procedure." By this he means the process by which political democracy achieves its results, including public discussion, with the aim of settling disputes through inquiry, consultation, and conference, instead of imposing authoritarian precepts and rules. Class distinctions, Dewey points out, set barriers against a democratic process in that each class tends "to live within itself" instead of communicating with other groups. He suggests that certain words are worth thinking about in this connection, e.g., communication and community. For there to be communication, a community needs to exist in which certain aims are pursued in common. He adds racial groups to social distinctions as potential barriers or potential opportunities for community-building by saying: "The variety, the heterogeneity, of racial groups ought to contribute to a richer and fuller life instead of having all differences of tradition and culture wiped out in the effort to get uniformity." (So much for the "melting pot," and so much more for the idea of "cultural pluralism.")

In discussing the place of vocational education in a democracy, Dewey argues for a "larger sense" of it. He means that individuals should not just be prepared for certain occupations apart from their participation in other dimensions of democratic life. Educators need to get away "from the idea that it is merely manual skill that is being developed to the idea that certain attitudes, capacities, forms of knowledge are being developed that will fit the individual . . . to choose wisely his line of occupational contact . . . and to engage thoughtfully and happily in life." Dewey puts this idea to work in the concluding remarks of the lecture by arguing that school organization and administration have been democratic less in practice than in theory; he adds that "it is hard to see" how students who are taking orders from others, as well as teachers who are "under more or less external control by administrators on the ground that they are not fitted or prepared to participate in selection and organization of materials and methods, are going to be effective educators of individuals for a democratic society."

Conclusion

Aside from the differences in approach to the subject of philosophy of education that have been noted between L3 and its predecessors — e.g., beginning the lectures by discussing philosophy and philosophy of education, not offering a formal definition of education — emphases held in common with L1, L2, and Democracy and Education are striking. Among them are the nature of interrelationships between organism and environment, between individual and social, between child and curriculum; the need to make democracy work as a way of life; the distinction between ends-in-view and ends achieved; and the necessity for life in schools to acknowledge the place of informal out-of-school activities in shaping the formal school subjects.

At the same time, Dewey had experienced much in the four decades since L1 and L2 and the two decades since Democracy and Education; and in 1937 a somewhat different world was very much with him. While in the earlier lectures and writings Dewey had taken care to point out the obstacles to a wider bringing to life of his educational ideas, in 1937 it is almost as if many of those obstacles had become engrained as part of an American way of life. World War I and its consequences, the economic depression of the 1930s, the threat to democracy by totalitarian states, and the hold of absolutistic values and standards on people's minds, all weighed heavily on Dewey's insistence that if one is not a philosophical absolutist one cannot
be an absolutist for peace, and his remarks about the undemocratic organization and administration of schools and the authoritarian way in which teachers and students are treated.

It will not do to attempt to characterize Dewey in those slippery terms, optimist or pessimist. He clearly has not lost hope in the possibilities of human beings learning how to make their own values and to test them by their own experience. Yet he seems more mindful in 1937 than in 1896, 1899, and 1916 of the recalcitrance of real obstacles to that kind of learning and testing.

References


