

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This paper contains excerpts from an unpublished commencement speech given by John Dewey at Illinois College in June of 1917.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 by 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.¹ 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 effort then it will not be in vain. This will be grand and an era of good will for mankind will be ushered in.²

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.

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.

Dewey began his address with a reflection on the writings of Francis Bacon,³ 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 humanistic 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 humanistic 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.⁴

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."⁵ 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 worthier 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. This, in Dewey's mind is the real problem of science and moral values.⁶

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 were to bear fruit in inventions for the service of man."⁷ 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."⁸ 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.

Humanity is helpless in the presence of the weapons of warfare. Humanity is not aided by the invention of means of destruction.

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?⁹

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

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.

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:

In the main, Bacon prophesied the direction of subsequent progress. But, he "anticipated" the advance. He did not see that the new science was for a long time to be worked in the interest of old ends of human exploitation. He thought it would rapidly give man new ends. Instead, it put at the disposal of a class the means to secure their old ends of aggrandizement at the expense of another class.¹¹

Dewey had hoped for a kind of social humanism in a democratic society in which commerce would be guided by principles learned from scientific method. In a world formed by a pragmatic system of knowing, which for Dewey meant the experimental method, goodwill, prosperity, and peace would most certainly prevail. Dewey believed that pragmatism, as a practical tool, could be applied not only to scientific research, but also to other areas of life. In 1916 he wrote:

The experimental method is new as a scientific resource—as a systematized means of making knowledge, though as old as life as a practical device. Hence it is not surprising that men have not recognized its full scope. For the most part, its significance is regarded as belonging to certain technical and merely physical matters. It will doubtless take a long time to secure the perception that it holds equally to the forming and testing of ideas in social and moral matters.¹²

In Dewey's viewpoint of an ever-changing world, he saw morals and religious values changing too; yet, he clung to his vision of a moral world, one in which men and women would work cooperatively through education to achieve better lives for all.

Dewey's prescription for reflective education included self-knowledge, and once obtained, men and women would be able to understand and exercise conscious control over their thoughts and actions. Dewey was aware of humanity's failings, yet he persisted with a faith that progress would prevail. In 1916, he wrote: "As Windelband has said, the new science of nature was the daughter of humanism."¹⁶ Dewey's belief was that an understanding of nature would lead to her practical use for the good of the world.

Randolf Bourne, who had been a student of Dewey's, attacked pragmatism as a philosophy of life. He felt that it was only viable for "a society at peace, prosperous and with a fund of progressive good will."¹³ Bourne thought that Dewey's philosophy failed in wartime because it lacked spiritual values, and that values had been subordinated to technique. Bourne became disillusioned with pragmatism when he saw what was happening in the country during the war years. In an essay entitled "Twilight of Idols," he wrote: "It is not an arena of creative intelligence our country's mind is now, but of mob psychology."¹⁴

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.

Dewey was well aware of the condition of the country's mind, but he thought that the opportunity for change had presented itself in the lessons of the war. In "Progress" he wrote: "But since the war has come, we may welcome whatever revelations of our stupidity and carelessness it brings with it, and set about the institution of a more manly and more responsible faith in progress than that in which we have indulged in the past."¹⁵ Dewey felt that men and women had not understood their own natures enough to be able to act responsibly, to make right choices when confronted with the power of scientific knowledge.

An interesting parallel with Dewey's vision drew me into a deeper reflection of the uses of scientific knowledge when the faculty at the college where I taught chose Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the novel for last year's freshman experience. As the students read and discussed the novel, it became clear that they were pointing to the misuse of science, and/or the lack of responsible science as a major theme and to Dr. Victor Frankenstein as the major offender. Most of the students in my group argued that it was his irresponsible use of scientific knowledge that gave birth to the harrowing events that took place throughout the novel.

When I read their papers, I could not help but connect their comments with the theme of Dewey's 1917 speech. For one student, Victor Frankenstein became a metaphor for human irresponsibility. He represented those, who out of blind ambition, seek to unlock the limits of human knowledge, without regard for consequences. "When the adrenaline of his ambitions ran out, he realized what horror he had created," exclaimed the student. A second student commented reflectively: "When it comes to creating, whether it is weapons, objects, or people, humans are nothing short of Godspeeds. When it comes to predicting outcomes and consequences, we creep at the pace of a snail." A third student wrote: "While we have made astonishing scientific advancements, mankind continues to be morally immature. It will require a moral renaissance if we are to be good stewards of the universe God created." Like Dewey, these students expressed their concern for an ethical, responsible approach to the understanding and use of nature.

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.

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."¹⁷ 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 that 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"¹⁸ 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."¹⁹

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 Husseins.²⁰

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."²¹ 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."²²

As the 21st century unfolds, and the world continues to be 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.

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- _____. Excerpts of a speech quoted in *Jacksonville Daily Journal*. Thursday, 14 June 1917, 5.
- _____. "Method in Science Teaching." In *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol. 10: 1916-1917*, 15 vols. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 130. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980.
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Endnotes

1. Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis in Famous Utopias*, intro. By Charles M. Andrews (New York: Tudor Publishing Co. 1937), 244.
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*.
4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 282-3.
5. John Dewey, "Progress." In *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol. 10: 1916-1917*, 15 vols. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 237. First published in *International Journal of Ethics* 26 (1916): 311-22.
6. Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 283-4.
7. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 283.
8. Bacon, *New Atlantis in Utopias*, 252.
9. Dewey, "Progress," *The Middle Works*, 236.
10. Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962), 227.
11. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 283.
12. *Ibid.* 338-9.
13. Randolph Bourne, "Twilight of Idols," in *The Seven Arts*, Vol. 2: May 1917-October 1917, (New York: AMS Reprint Company), 691. Originally published monthly (New York: Seven Arts Publishing Co.).
14. *Ibid.*, 689.
15. Dewey, "Progress," *The Middle Works*, 234.
16. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 281.
17. John Dewey, "The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy," *The Middle Works*, 139. First published in *Manual Training and Vocational Education* 17 (1916): 409-14.
18. John Dewey, "Method in Science Teaching," *The Middle Works*, 130. Address before the Science Section of the N.E.A., in New York, July, 1916. First published in *General Science Quarterly* 1 (1916): 3-9.
19. Dewey, "Progress," *The Middle Works*, 237.
20. Paul Strathern, *Mendeleev's Dream: The Quest for the Elements* (New York: Berkley Books, 2000), 158.
21. John Dewey, "The Modern Trend Toward Vocational Education in Its Effect upon the Professional and Non-Professional Education Studies of the University," *The Middle Works*, 156. First published in *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of the Association of American Universities* (November 1917): 27-32.
22. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 230.