The Faith of a Pedagogue

Dewey had always been interested in the processes of education. From his earliest days at Ann Arbor he had lectured on issues in education, had given little impromptu addresses on the value of college education, had cooperated with the association of Michigan high school teachers, and had lectured quite widely on the impact of the “new psychology” on teaching practices. There was much more to his concern with “pedagogy” than that, however. Dewey’s aims as a teacher of teachers or perhaps one might better say as a provider of moral and intellectual frameworks for teachers were pitched at a higher level than curriculum reform or bringing much-needed life to the curriculum. The continuity of purpose and even of idiom between his Sunday morning talks to the students at Ann Arbor and his new addresses to teachers is striking. Dewey’s first famous statement of his educational convictions, “My Pedagogic Creed,” which he wrote in 1896 for the School Journal, is so replete with striking statements of the religious character of all true education, as well as with equally striking statements of the centrality of the school to social progress and the centrality of the educational experience to all social understanding, that anyone writing about him must be sorely tempted to give up and let him do the job for himself. It is also so briskly written that it makes one wish that Dewey could more often have brought himself to shoot from the hip as he does here. After explaining the place of the school in rationally organized social change, elegantly rebutting the forced contrast between an individualism that lets the child run amok and a collectivism that stifles him, Dewey ends with the declaration “I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and ushers in the true kingdom of God.” As Lawrence Cremin mildly observed, “Little wonder that American educators came to view this quiet little man with the dark mustache as a Moses who would eventually lead them toward the pedagogic promised land.”

The “uplift” offered by Dewey’s conclusion was one aspect of the continuity of interests between his younger, more straightforwardly religious self and his secular, liberal, and pragmatist self. Another, and it is closely connected to the first, is the way education becomes a central case for a view of the world that smoothed away sharp oppositions and allowed readers a strikingly optimistic view of the future. Education was thus redefined as “the art of giving shape to human powers and adapting them to social service” and, as so defined, was “the supreme art.” To suppose that this was what education did was to suppose that children came into the world not as tabula rasae upon which teachers might write whatever they chose or as limbs of Satan, whose wills must be curbed to make them “apt for society,” as Hobbes once put it, but as bundles of intellectual, emotional, and moral potential naturally ready to turn into useful and happy adults. As he did later in Democracy and Education, Dewey took the chance to display his vision of the way individual and society might mesh. He asserted his belief that:

the individual who is to be educated is a social individual, and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass. Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child’s capacities, interests, and habits. It must be controlled at every point by reference to these same considerations. These powers, interests, and habits must be continually interpreted—we must know what they mean. They must be translated into terms of their social equivalents—into terms of what they are capable of in the way of social service.

This was the educational creed of a progressive, but not altogether the creed of a “progressive educator.” That is, to the extent that progressive education came to be a label for an educational theory that overemphasized the importance of teaching what interested the child, that overemphasized the child’s responsibility for what went on at school, what rules governed the school’s activities, and what he was or was not supposed to learn, Dewey was utterly hostile to progressive education so described. He said endlessly that he believed that his emphasis on the need to take the child’s abilities and interests seriously had been taken by some people as a license to abandon teaching, that “child-centered” had come to mean that it was unimportant what the teacher did, and for any such view he had complete contempt. His position was decided a progressive one in every other sense. It made sense as an educational doctrine only if one supposed that the school was an engine of social progress; anyone who believed that the engine of social progress was the marketplace and that schools simply produced a supply of more or less trained labor would have found Dewey’s views absurdly romantic. By the same token, anyone less optimistic about social progress would have thought him naïve; Bertrand Russell once observed that nobody who did not have a profound sense of the reality of original sin ought to teach. Dewey could make no sense of such a view. He took it for granted that even in the best-run school there would be a need for a minimal amount of repressive discipline; but he did not say so loudly, and it did not bulk large in his views. It might be necessary to protect the social environment in which learning took place, but it had no place in the learning process itself. His thoughts on evolution suggested that the integrated child is a happy child, that virtue is both its own reward and the path to true happiness, and that a well-run school will thus be working with the grain of infant nature and not against it.

In a more cynical or merely more anxious age, this seems unduly optimistic, but one aspect of Dewey’s progressivism has lost none of its point in the intervening hundred years. A democratic society must be a restless society; it
must be an innovative society. Even in 1896 Dewey insisted that “it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions.”

The lesson was that every pupil must be put “in complete possession of all his powers.” Only by making children the masters both of what is already part of “the funded capital” of society and of the aptitude to acquire what will unpredictably be added to it in the future do we prepare them for the world after school. In a general way, this is plainly the liberal view of education; that it should seem banal to many of us is only a sign of how far we have moved from a belief in the virtues of producing factory fodder or instilling simple political acquiescence in a lower class whose destiny is to take orders and do the world’s work.

At the University of Chicago Dewey had a chance to put all this into practice. The “Dewey School,” otherwise the Laboratory School, was supposed to be what its name suggested: a laboratory. It was not a teacher training institution or primarily intended to provide a dazzling different elementary education for its students. In practice it became a test bed where Dewey’s ideas about how to teach children were put into practice. A hundred years later Dewey’s school seems less astonishing than it did to his contemporaries. It was obviously a wonderful school. It was also wonderful in ways that strike a modern reader as utterly unsurprising—until we reflect that the school was intended to break with the practice of elementary schools generally and to provide an intellectually and logically coherent education rather than a mere infusion of factual information. Its resemblance to the better sort of elementary school in post-1945 Britain and the United States is not an indictment of it but a tribute to its success. By the time the Laboratory School was founded, Friedrich Froebel’s experiments in kindergarten teaching were sixty years old. Froebel’s pedagogical practice was not unlike Dewey’s; it emphasized cooperative play and manual training and was imaginative in its use of wooden blocks and rings for teaching arithmetic. Compared with Dewey, however, Froebel was a mystic, while his vision of the child’s innate drive for creative self-expression credited the child’s “nature” with a good deal more than Dewey was inclined to do and led to a corresponding rigidity in his pedagogy. The observer of a late-twentieth-century elementary school sees what one might call the precipitate of sensitive teaching through creative play that has been left behind when the philosophical soup in which it first existed has been boiled off.

In something of the same way we do not see the differences between Dewey’s practice and that of Maria Montessori that so agitated the young William Kilpatrick in 1914. But Mme. Montessori believed that children’s development took place according to fixed principles and at fixed stages; her techniques and the apparatus she invented for children to play with and learn from could be, as they were with her, treated as sacrosanct. Dewey’s experimentalism was at odds with that attitude, just as his interactive view of the way the child developed almost as a part of the environment was at odds with any idea that everything was “innate.” His emphasis on the development of the child’s sociability was also at odds with Montessori’s emphasis on more narrowly intellectual development; she was famous for insisting that when children drew trees, they must color them green, not red. It is because Montessori’s methods and equipment were so readily usable by teachers who had little sympathy with her early intellectualism or her later mysticism that one would today be hard pressed to guess the philosophical affiliations of most elementary schools.

Dewey’s school lasted only seven and a half years; it was closed by being wholly merged with the training school at the institute when Dewey left for Columbia. With adequate financing there was no reason why it could not have gone on forever. Its educational results were entirely satisfactory, as everyone from the most to the least committed agreed. It was in this quite unlike more radical and freewheeling undertakings, such as the school at Beacon Hill that Dora and Bertrand Russell ran in the 1920s and A. S. Neill’s Summerhill. Their results were much less impressive.

It would have been surprising if the Dewey School had been anything other than a success. It was an object of admiration and enthusiasm to some of Dewey’s most distinguished colleagues, including the sociologists Albion Small and W. I. Thomas, the geologist Thomas Chamberlin, and the physicist Albert Michelson, all of whom lectured to the children. One of the engaging features of the University of Chicago was the way in which it was set up to take an intelligent interest in the city around it and in the social and intellectual development of its inhabitants. Dewey and Albion Small discussed pedagogical and sociological theory in the context of the school, and it was very much in the minds of Dewey’s junior colleagues Mead, Tufts, and Jim Angell. With devoted teachers able to call for help and occasional lectures from people with such a passion for their own disciplines, it would have been surprising if the children had failed to learn a great deal. Nonetheless, the reader of Dewey’s work is invariably surprised by the minor place that the details of the curriculum occupy in his account of the school and its purpose. Even when Dewey writes The School and Society, what he writes about is the place of the school in a democracy and the role of the school as an agent of social progress—not down-to-earth issues like the kind of mathematics to teach eight-year-olds. There are barely a dozen pages of curricular matter in the hundred-odd-page discussion of educational principle and description of the Lab School.

Dewey’s opening discussion is one that he repeated, if not endlessly, at any rate very frequently; it is in itself enough to give the lie to anyone who supposes that his ideas were “child-centered.” He observes that in the fairly recent past education took place at home because life was lived mostly around the home. In the countryside the connection between getting a living and everyday life was everywhere intimate, visible, and immediate. Children were inevitably socialized into becoming useful participants in the household and village econ-
ogy. "There was always something which really needed to be done, and a real necessity that each member of the household should do his own part faithfully and in cooperation with others." 38 The modern city has broken that simple bond between child, his upbringing, and his finding a useful place in society. As always, Dewey was fastidious about not giving a one-sided account. "We must recognize our compensations—the increase in toleration, in breadth of social judgment, the larger acquaintance with human nature, the sharper alertness in reading signs of character and interpreting social situations, greater accuracy of adaptation to differing personalities, contact with greater commercial activities. These considerations mean much to the city-bred child of today." 39

It left a large question: "[H]ow shall we retain these advantages and yet introduce into the school something representing the other side of life—occupations which exact personal responsibilities and which train the child in relation to the physical realities of life?" 40 On this there are several things to be said. One is how important it was from the very beginning that Dewey saw elementary education—education up to the age of thirteen—as moral training rather than purely intellectual training. Indeed, "purely intellectual" would have been a term of abuse. There are two extremes from which Dewey has always been attacked, on the one side as someone who has an inadequate view of the need for discipline, order, and instilled habit, and on the other as a theorist of the manipulation of children into docile membership of the corporate order. 41 If one were forced to choose sides, the latter complaint is nearer the mark than the first. Both, however, are infinitely far from the truth. The place the skeptic must start from is not Dewey's desire that the powers of the child should find their natural fulfillment in life in a democratic society but his belief that there is such a natural harmony to be had. Though Dewey claimed to have thrown out metaphysics as a basis for social and political thinking, there is a broad sense of "metaphysical" in which it remained true that what separated him from more spectral liberals was his metaphysical assumption of a harmony to be realized by intelligent action as against their belief that at the very best we were never going to be wholly at ease with one another in a modern society. 42

The second thing to notice is the light that Dewey's starting point casts on his concern with "manual training." Another traditional complaint against Dewey is that his emphasis on learning by doing amounts to a recipe for preparing children to go on to vocational schools. Since American schools, like British and other schools, often put the perceived brightest children into academic streams and the perceived less bright into vocational streams and thus made it more likely that the bright children would go on to be prosperous and well-rounded members of the managing classes while the less bright would be variably but certainly less prosperous members of the managed nonelite, all discussion of manual training tends to raise the unhappy specter of an educational system that takes the existing division between managerial and manual work and reproduces it in the classroom. Dewey's position deflects simple cate-

gorization. He admitted that if there were an adequate system of trade schools, there would be something to be said for manual training in the elementary school as a way of getting children to acquire the dexterity, discipline, and work habits that such trade schools could then turn into the skills needed for wives and mothers, on the one hand, and manual workers, on the other. But he promptly abandoned that ground. To think of practical training in this way was "unnecessarily narrow. We must conceive of work in wood and metal, of weaving, sewing and cooking, as methods of living and learning, not as distinct studies." 43

Agricultural societies focused on farm and village showed the child the entire process by which life went on; there was no turning a switch and having electric light, but an elaborate process of killing animals, rendering tallow, making candles, and so on and so forth. What the school needs to do is show children the complexity of the modern world. Dewey did not think that it could be done by just telling them about the way industry and commerce worked; swamping children with elaborate information in their early years was hopeless: They would get the habit of superficial understanding, probably be bored, never learn to concentrate on one topic or activity. What they had to do was work their way through some such activity from beginning to end; at the Lab School the children grew wheat in a corner of the schoolyard, ground it, learned to make bread, and so on. When slightly older, they learned about metal smelting and built their own furnace. To learn chemistry, they cooked, and to cook, they learned chemistry. This was one way that Dewey genuinely called acquiring a hands-on understanding of the world. The striking thing about it is not that it was commercially driven but that it was so visibly driven by moral and philosophical preconceptions. Among the many ways in which it was unobtrusively ahead of its time, there was no distinction in the work done by boys and girls. Dewey was not a particularly radical feminist, but he was an intransigent egalitarian.

A third feature of Dewey's discussion was that it was predicated on a view of the need for the educational process to make adequate ties with every aspect of the life around it that Dewey felt with some passion but whose intellectual as distinct from its emotional point is not easy to discern. In the chapter "Waste in Education"—itself a slightly odd location for what he actually discussed—Dewey leaped in one bound from the concept of waste to that of organization and then spread his wings on the topic of just what organization meant for the school. Producing several charts, he read his audience a sermon on the theme that "All waste is due to isolation. Organization is nothing but getting things into connection with one another so that they work easily, flexibly and fully." 44 The details of his picture of the integrated school do not matter very much, but the frame of mind that it evidenced does. For "organization" took on a decidedly supermanagerial tone in the argument. The school was a spiritual rather than a physical entity; as one might expect from a philosopher who so stressed the way we react to the "meaning" of events, Dewey emphasized
that the school was a network of meanings rather than merely a collection of spaces in which children read, cooked, played, painted, and whatever. The "organization" Dewey had in mind was a kind of balancing of the school's ties to the entire social environment; cooking in the school kitchen linked the child both to home, where such activities went on, and to the countryside, where food was grown, and thus to the school's own physical environment, while sewing in the textile room tied the school both to the home, where such things went on, too, and then out to the world of business and industry.\(^5\)

*The School and Society* was vastly popular; its popularity may have been a function of the curious combination of the great clarity of its general orientation and the great openness of its argumentative texture. As the above discussion suggests, Dewey insisted over and over that school was itself part of life, not just a preparation for it, that the child had to bring into play at school all of his or her energies, not just intellectual ones and not just manual skills; that something of vast importance was happening in the school, since this was where the next generation was growing, and everyone knew that it was vastly easier to form children adequately than to have to reform them when they were teenage delinquents. All this was good news, but it did not yield very obvious conclusions about just what to teach and just how to teach it. There, too, of course, Dewey had headed off his critics in advance; the distinction between how to teach and what to teach was another of the isolations and separations that he deplored. Form and content, style and matter were to be adjusted to each other as we more fully understood what successful elementary teaching was all about. We knew that it was not about handing over slabs of undigested fact, we knew that it was a mistake to send the young out into the world primed with information but with no skills of processing and evaluating it; beyond that, *experientia docet* was the motto: People must experiment, report on their experiments, and hope to agree on good practice. Dewey himself was thus ready to do things recommended by theories and perspectives that he did not accept as an adequate guide to education in general.

So, for instance, he told an amusing story of a visitor asking to see the kindergarten section of the Lab School and being told there was none. Then the visitor "asked if there were not singing, drawing, manual training, plays and dramatizations, and attention to the children's social relations. When her questions were answered in the affirmative, she remarked, both triumphantly and indignantly, that that was what she understood by a kindergarten, and that she did not know what was meant by saying that the school had no kindergarten."\(^6\) Dewey observed that there was a sense in which everything the school did for children between the ages of four and thirteen was intended to "carry into effect certain principles which Froebel was perhaps the first consciously to set forth."\(^7\) But Dewey would not have passed himself off as a disciple of Froebel's, nor did he associate himself with the Froebel movement in America. One reason is particularly interesting: Dewey thought Froebel had been unable to give a direct and sensible account of the value of play.
In Dewey's view of Froebel's plight, Froebel had to give elaborate metaphysical justifications of the symbolic values of childish playacting, and to do so, he had to detach school activities from the outside world, to protect the child against the everyday world. 49 The American child had an inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness, and his activities at school needed no elaborate symbolic defenses. They were ways of integrating his everyday desire for play into the process of leading him gently toward adult life. Froebel's kindergarten methods could be employed, usefully detached from his philosophy.

The same attitude of not quite acceptance and not quite rejection marked his approach to the influence of Johann Herbart. Herbart was best known for the slogan “Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”—a misleading and distracting slogan in biology and much worse in its effect on the social sciences. What it means literally is that the growth of the individual takes place in stages that mirror the development of the species. What it meant in schools was that the curriculum was supposed to be governed by the individual child's gradual movement from an infancy in which he or she mimicked the mental and social relations of primitive peoples to an adult life in which he or she was a full member of a fully civilized community. Dewey wrote several papers disputing this as a picture of child development. Yet the curriculum of the Lab School took something like it as a model; as a critic noticed, “in the ordered progression of theme activities from preliterate man to modern society there were patent vestiges of the very recapitulation theory Dewey had attacked before the National Herbart Society.” 51

In Dewey's mind, teaching children about the growth of human culture in an evolutionary fashion and sophisticating the children's grasp of increasingly abstract material did not rest on any such theory as Herbart's. Dewey's guiding thought was much more nearly that children were gradually weaned from their homes and the emotional and intellectual stimuli that home provided and onto a more abstract, more impersonal intellectual and social diet. It would doubtless have been possible to each children history and social studies by starting with modern society and working backward, but it takes little imagination to think of some reasons why we prefer them to learn a little about Neolithic man and a lot about the contemporary world rather than a little about New York and a great deal of paleontology.

On the broad issue of the plausibility of Dewey's picture of child development, opinions have always varied. Nonacademically minded infant teachers might think that Dewey always had his eye too much on where children were going next and not enough on the joys of the particular stage they had reached. Academically minded readers by contrast may well flinch at Dewey's account of how long it was before the children of the Lab School were supposed to settle down and learn some of the three Rs. What cannot be denied, however, is that the gradual shift from what others would have denoted as play to what others would have denoted as real work—neither of which Dewey would have so labeled at any point—was always controlled by a clear idea of the child's destination. It was not nostalgia for a vanishing rural past that made Dewey start the six-year-olds on small-scale farming, harvesting, and cooking the results of their labors, but his belief that these were the basic activities of human existence, ones that children already understood some part of by the time they reached school.

Letters to friends describing the first days of the school show the children always being propelled toward adult competence: On their first morning they made boxes to hold their pencils; then they saw how to measure them and learned some basic geometry. Play in the sandbox turned mathematical almost immediately, too. The homeliness of Dewey's manner, and the homeliness of his examples, are misleading as to the real intellectual thrust of the syllabus he suggested. It was not that he thought that all knowledge is applied knowledge or that he thought all learning was somehow to be assimilated to farming or washing the dishes; it was rather that he believed so passionately that ideas made sense only as solutions to problems and that educationalists had chronically neglected this fact that he saw his own contribution as suggesting ways of putting children into situations where they would grasp the problems to which increasingly sophisticated ideas were solutions and for which sophisticated academic skills of a familiar skills were increasingly needed. Dewey always tried to steer a delicate path between simpler but wrongheaded views that were not wholly wrong but that in his eyes missed the point. When he started writing about education, two opposed positions much in the public eye were the Herbartian emphasis on interest and the emphasis of his old mentor W. T. Harris on effort. Dewey thought the Herbartian's emphasis came to no more than sugaring the pill of a set curriculum, while Harris's emphasis on effort without interest would create students who were either excessively passive or merely rebellious. The point of Dewey's complicated argument about setting children problems and teaching them to think was that he believed that under those conditions they would be interested as the Herbartians wished them to be and would make the effort that Harris and his colleagues rightly stressed.

All these arguments are, so to speak, "precuticular," and Dewey's little pamphlet The Child and the Curriculum is in the same way not a discussion of the curriculum but another plea for the abolition of sharp separations in methods of teaching where there ought to be none in the process of learning. The slogans of "Discipline" and "Interest" that opposed sides hurled at each other, one thinking to defend "the subject," the other thinking to defend "the child," reflected an analytical distinction that had been inflated into a false vision of the world. Of course, children must learn something in particular, of course, there was a particular direction in which they needed to be led, so of course, they needed to master the disciplines of learning; but to master anything in such a way as to have really been educated by it was a matter of absorbing it
and turning it to one's own purposes, and this was a matter of our own interest. The only discipline worth having was self-discipline, and the only interest worth gratifying was an interest capable of being sustained over a long enough run to enable us to learn a subject matter thoroughly.

How We Think

This is the lesson spelled out for two hundred pages in How We Think.\(^{53}\) How We Think was a characteristic exercise in Dewey's mature idiom. It was published in 1910, six years after Dewey left Chicago, but like much else published during that time, it is essentially a "Chicago" work. It remains eighty years later an astonishingly sensible book, and it offers exactly what Dewey proposes to offer—namely, a guide for teachers who are puzzled to know what counts as intellectual progress on the part of their students and when they are in its presence. All the same, it contains a good deal of philosophical provocation. The observation that "Primarily, naturally, it is not we who think in any actively responsible sense; thinking is rather something that happens in us" is both true and shocking; the further suggestion that to say "I think" is to announce an achievement is in the same vein.\(^{54}\) The whole book is a good example of the strengths and weaknesses of the kind of philosophy that Dewey came to practice. On the debit side, a lot of what Dewey says can appear too obvious to be worth elaborate statement, and the steadfastness of Dewey's treatment of his subject makes it hard for the reader to know when sudden illumination will strike. An unkind paraphrase of the book's argument might be that we think in order to reach answers, that we need answers because we have questions, and that good thinking is thinking that is well tailored to produce good answers. By the same token, his view of teachers' tendencies to divide children into bright and dull is fair enough but not unusually insightful: "A boy dull in geometry may prove quick on the uptake when he takes up the subject in manual training; the girl who seems inaccessible to historical facts may respond promptly when it is a question of judging the character and deeds of people of her acquaintance or of fiction."\(^{55}\)

Nothing is gained by denying features of Dewey's work that readers have complained of for eighty years. There are two things to be said on the other side, and they are of great importance. The first is that Dewey was addressing himself to teachers who found themselves bombarded on all sides with pana- ceas; he refused to add to their number. He made good sense philosophically credible and morally uplifting, and that is an achievement not to be sneered at. In that spirit he refused to accept that teaching was to be left either to muddling through or to the flail or lack of flair of the individual teacher. There really was a problem—catching the child's attention, providing materials for thought, getting the child to think consecutively, coherently, organizedly, self-propelledly, and relevantly, and watching always for how this contributed to what was to come next—and this problem was not soluble simply or by some trick; but it was not soluble at all by people who failed to identify it. Or as he put it, the problem was to find "the forms of activity (a) which are most congenial, best adapted, to the immature stage of development; (b) which have the most ulterior promise as preparation for the social responsibilities of adult life; and (c) which, at the same time, have the maximum of influence in forming habits of acute observation and of consecutive inference."\(^{56}\) Once we set up the issue like that, scientific education must look tremendously attractive, the more so to the extent that children themselves devise their own experiments, build their equipment, cooperate in designing and running their own projects, but answer to someone else for the results. Yet even the reader who thinks Dewey has loaded the scales in favor of his view that good education is permeated with the scientific outlook must admit that the contrast between lugubrious modern discussions in which scientific education is assumed to have the one and only purpose of assisting the country in international trade and Dewey's vision of a training simultaneously moral, social, and intellectual is all in Dewey's favor.

A question we must return to but may properly duck for the moment is whether Dewey's approach does not slight training in the humanities. As we have seen several times, Dewey's stress on problem solving, on the social basis of knowledge, and on education as a form of social training looks as though it will make science central to the content of education, will turn history and geography into applied social science, as the study of how societies conceived as problem-solving organizations adapt to their environment by adjusting themselves to their opportunities and demands and adjusting it to their needs and techniques. Where in this is a love of poetry, art, or music for its own sake? Where is the cultivation of the eye and ear and a sense of rhythmic aptness? Dewey in fact thought that human beings had a natural urge to celebrate, commemorate, dance, play, sing, and paint and had no difficulty in encouraging these as school activities. The difficulty lay in giving an account of their developed state, accommodating the thought that Mozart's operas are not "good for" society but that their creation justifies society's existence. The fact that unlike both his old teachers G. S. Morris and G. Stanley Hall—the latter of whom had handkered after a career as a concert pianist—Dewey was tone-deaf and had no interest in or liking for music may explain the comparative feebleness of his remarks about this side of school life. Throughout the 1930s he defended art education in elementary schools as an essential, not a frill, and he knew what he was in favor of. The question of how it fitted into the schema he offered teachers was another matter.

The second point to be made in Dewey's favor is that he was writing against many current practices but with a swelling tide. We see as common sense ideas that came to be common sense because liberal educators like Dewey made them common sense. How We Think was addressed to working teachers; a large part of the teacher's trade at the turn of the century was conducting recitations, sessions when, as the name suggests, children had to "recite their
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lessons" and the teachers "heard" them. Dewey felt that unless they were conducted very well, they were diseductive: "To re-cite is to cite again, to tell over and over. If we were to call this period reiteration, the designation would hardly bring out more clearly than does the word recitation the complete domination of instruction by rehearsing of second-hand information, by memorizing for the sake of producing correct replies at the proper time."57 When visitors to the United States encounter multiple-choice tests for the first time, they usually share Dewey’s sentiments.

When Dewey was writing, the better-trained teachers were accustomed to drawing up lesson plans along lines laid down by Johann Herbart. Herbart had claimed, in Dewey’s presentation at any rate, that "there is a single ‘general method’ uniformly followed by the mind in an effective attack upon any subject. Whether it be a first-grade child mastering the rudiments of number, a grammar-school pupil studying history, or a college student dealing with philology, in each case the first step is preparation, the second presentation, followed in turn by comparison and generalization, ending in the application of the generalizations to new and specific instances."58

Suppose the lesson was to be a lesson on rivers, to take Dewey’s example. As “preparation,” we would begin by getting the children to talk about streams and rivers they had seen, or about water flowing in gutters, and explain the purpose of the lesson; “presentation” would then involve the formal viewing of films, photographs, models, perhaps a visit to look at rivers. Comparison and generalization are the stages by which the inessential features of the phenomenon are stripped away, so that a solid sense of what we are supposed to know about rivers is left. Finally this knowledge would be anchored by being applied to new cases, so that children who knew about the Thames, say, would go on to write about the Hudson. Dewey was in something of a rhetorical dilemma vis-à-vis this Herbartian orthodoxy. He did not want to say that teachers should walk into class and play it by ear, but he did want to say that the five-stage schema was too pat, too neat, and in crucial ways misleading. He did not want to exaggerate the difference between his own view and the Herbartian. Still, he did want to insist that the Herbartian schema suggested that imparting concepts and information for their own sake was the sum total of instruction. What was lacking was any sense of the purpose of instruction; it left out the whole purpose of acquiring knowledge—namely, the need to solve a problem.

This emerged by contrast with Dewey’s own five-stage schema, one that he cheerfully admitted was never followed in all its steps and was very much elicited from our thinking rather than dreamed up a priori. Dewey’s five stages of what he called “the complete act of thought” were “(i) a felt difficulty; (ii) its location and definition; (iii) suggestion of a possible solution; (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection; that is, the conclusion of belief or disbelief.”59 The examples Dewey gives show how far he refused to draw a line between method in factual subjects and methods for making decisions. The first example is that of a man who realizes he is pressed for time to get to an appointment and wonders whether to take the subway or the elevated railroad; the second is that of seeing a long white pole with a gold ball at the tip projecting from the prow of a ferry and wondering what its purpose is; the third is more nearly a scientific puzzle: discovering what accounts for the phenomenon of bubbles forming around the rims of newly washed glasses stood upside down to drain. For Dewey, they are illuminated by the same structural analysis. The analysis he offers is informal but interesting because it suggests how difficult it is to map the process that he so plausibly describes by a formal logical analysis. The fourth step, in particular, which consists of converting a hypothesis into a suggested explanation whose relevance to the phenomena to be explained is articulated and made obvious, is exceedingly hard to formalize, though logicians have labored to create a “relevance logic” for many years. In the context of Dewey’s long career, the analysis occupies a central place because it is the structure of all scientific (and therefore of all fully articulated) thinking. In the context of this morality tale for teachers, however, it serves a slightly different purpose.

Considering that he wanted to praise the Herbartian scheme, while suggesting it was inadequate, and that he wanted to offer a structure for teaching without cramping the teacher or the child, what Dewey had to do—and what he rather successfully did—was show that his five-stage scheme overlapped the established scheme but brought out more clearly and more aptly something central to the educational process. The crucial difference comes at the very beginning. Dewey’s children begin with a problem; the objects of the Herbartian schema begin with a teacher’s lesson plan and the goals that the teacher was supposed to announce to the class before she started the lesson. Dewey’s children acquire information on their way to solving a problem; information is assimilated in the process of thinking their way through to a solution. As Dewey says, the Herbartian scheme does not, so to speak, exclude the idea that we think about what we learn, but it does strongly suggest that thought is incidental to information acquisition, while Dewey insists that acquiring information is incidental to thinking as problem solving. Not emphasizing this sufficiently made the Herbartian scheme misleading.

In light of the attacks on Dewey and progressive education that came after his death, it is amusing to see him launching preemptive strikes against the degeneration of his ideas that perhaps did occur with his supposed disciple William H. Kilpatrick at Columbia Teachers College.60 How We Think makes thinking an active business, but it is unremittingly hostile to any attempt to reduce education to undisciplined activities meant to keep the children interested. Such an attempt, Dewey thought, was doubly doomed: The children would get bored, and they would learn nothing. Deweyan education involved gaining a capacity to act intelligently—that is, to formulate plans, to take relevant facts into account, to do what he regarded as particularly difficult:
namely, to suspend judgment, hold on to doubt, rethink problems, but never lose sight of the ultimate end in view. Activity for activity's sake was neither here nor there, and Kilpatrick's enthusiastic advocacy of the "project" system was something that Dewey accepted only so long as there was a very clear view of what purposes the projects were to serve and a great deal of dispassionate reflection on how at every stage of the child's intellectual growth the projects now undertaken would propel him or her to the next stage of growth.

Estimating the effect Dewey actually had on American education is extremely difficult. On the whole, his defenders suggest that he had rather little effect; one might parody their argument as the claim that since public education is still absolutely terrible, Dewey cannot have had much effect. His detractors have sometimes suggested that he single-handedly deaunched a previously fine system; since he first wrote about education at a time when no more than 7 percent of the population had a high school education and less than half got as many as five years of schooling, this is perhaps an exaggeration. The one example of a school system supposedly devoted to running all its schools on Deweyan lines, the school system at Gary, Indiana, directed by Superintendent William Wirt between 1929 and 1932, evaporates on closer inspection. Wirt's ideas about running a school system were extremely clever. He thought it should be possible to double the use of a given set of school buildings by carefully planning the school day and by designing the schools in such a way that two shifts of children could use the buildings in succession. He organized the schools on what was described as a "platoon system," where half the children would be using the classrooms while the other half were using the facilities for manual training, so that the whole school would be in constant use. He was also an educational radical and in his account of the Gary system appealed to Dewey's ideas about education in support of his own. Yet Wirt's schools were not run on the lines of the Lab School, and from the beginning many of Wirt's critics complained that the only radical thought he possessed was about how to make schools radically cheaper.

This is probably too severe. Schools of Tomorrow, jointly written by Dewey and his daughter Evelyn, praised the Gary schools as an exercise in educating children for democracy, and Randolph Bourne's The Gary Schools also answered the question I posed earlier by arguing that Wirt had shown that Dewey's ideas were capable of implementation on a mass scale. One may still wonder whether this was true. Wirt himself seemed always much prouder of the fact that his schoolchildren were competent to rebuild their own schools from scratch if the occasion were to arise than of anything more "Deweyan." Dewey himself never seemed to be quite sure which of his ideas were capable of large-scale implementation in the American public school system and which might be hard to implement outside the setting of the Lab School. The Lab School taught classes of eight and ten, while most public schools had classes of forty and often more. Schools of Tomorrow praises the Gary schools—Dewey never saw them firsthand, but his daughter Evelyn did so—more for the role they played in the community and their adaptability to different needs than for their espousal of his own view of child development. This communitarian passion sustained all his writings on education. As we shall see below, Dewey's desire that the school should not be an "apart institution" led him to set great store by the educational side of ventures like Jane Addams's Hull House, and it was this facet of the Gary schools that he admired. The idea of the school in the Gary system was that it should be open all the year-round, that it should be a community center as well as a school, narrowly considered, that it should offer courses on a variety of bases and for a variety of ages. It was thus the product of the same frame of mind that produced in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s "village colleges" that housed the local school, together with meeting rooms, and very often space for child welfare clinics and other social services. It would be easy to approve of such initiatives for any number of different reasons, from the efficiency of housing as many activities as possible in one place for maximum utilization of the buildings to the virtues of using the place to which parents had anyway to bring their children as the place where they could also get useful information, use recreational facilities for themselves, and be tempted to undertake adult education. Such reasons might very well suggest Dewey's desire that the school should both be a community and be of its community.

Among the reasons why Dewey's influence was never likely to be as great as critics and defenders have claimed, three stand out. They are obvious, but they are conclusive. One is that Dewey schools would be expensive; they need small classes, a lot of equipment, and elaborate internal administrative arrangements so that teachers can spend time and attention rethinking what they are doing. Dewey's vision of the school as a place of experiment was, it must be remembered, not a vision of an "experimental school" in the sense of a place where eccentric, novel, or surprising things went on, but the vision of a place permeated by the experimental spirit. It could only be run by teachers who were able to get together to discuss their goals, their techniques, their successes and failures, and prospects for change. Second, Dewey schools are appallingly demanding of their teachers. Dewey may have assured teachers that they were doing God's work, but God's work is hard work. Since Dewey's educational philosophy was so determinedly teleological—at every stage the child was seen as a creature about to embark on the next stage of growth—the teacher could not concentrate only on the child's current attainments and interests. Every encounter with a child was an occasion to see how the moment might be turned to advantage in giving him or her a grasp of arithmetic, languages, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, history, and whatever other skills we wish them to acquire. There were never many teachers' colleges capable of turning out teachers with that range of skills, and considering the rates of pay for primary teachers, it was unlikely that many people with the ability to learn what this demanded were going to volunteer to become teachers. The third reason is that it is simply unclear just what a "Deweyan" school
is like. Dewey was a philosopher. He was not an administrator, as William Wirt was, and he was not a teacher of teachers, as William Kilpatrick was. His writings were chronically described as impenetrably difficult. Indeed, readers today would often be hard put to it to decide just what their implications are for the organization of schools and the content of their syllabi. Anyone defending Dewey against his critics has a much easier time showing what he does not believe about the purpose of education than in giving a concrete account of what his views entail for school reform. That is not altogether a complaint against Dewey; just as a "Christian" education, for example, might take many forms but would always be recognizably unlike a secular education, so a "Deweyan" school might take many different forms but would be recognizably unlike the main alternatives: It would be secular, self-conscious, friendly to science, hostile to standardized tests and academic examinations, and a good deal more besides. But under that general umbrella a good many alternatives might plausibly shelter.

When critics complain of progressive education, they have in mind a host of different grievances, not all of which fit together smoothly. For instance, critics of progressivism in education sometimes complain that students learn too little about serious academic subjects and sometimes that they learn nothing practical and useful for earning a living. The first complaint would clearly be met by insisting on four years of Latin and Greek, but it would do little for the second; the second would be met by universal computer literacy, but it would do little to meet the first complaint. Again, critics commonly complain that progressive educationalists underestimate the need for discipline and allow schools to turn into disorganized playgrounds, but they also complain that schools turn out children who have too little initiative, which is not ordinarily produced by rigid discipline. Assessing Dewey's progressivism is made difficult by the absence of a single clear alternative.

All the same, in defending Dewey against the usual complaints, one must not lose sight of his real vulnerability. He was, in general, more interested in making children competent members of their society than in encouraging the very cleverest to scale the highest intellectual peaks. He emphasized the importance of tradition, but only as something to use, and there is certainly one form of intellectual conservatism that sees tradition as something which we immerse ourselves in and test ourselves by rather than as a mere stock of useful resources. The introspective nonjoiner gets rather short shrift in Dewey's universe; no doubt many such children are alienated and isolated and ought to be encouraged to be more sociable, but many more are imaginative, quirky, original, and simply working out their own intellectual salvation. Bertrand Russell's grandmother gave him a Bible, inscribed with her favorite moral admonition: "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil." That ethical individualism, that ability to stand out against the crowd, is something Dewey never sufficiently emphasized in his educational writings. It is as though he thought the main hazard that children faced was that of estrangement from their surroundings—and in 1890s Chicago and pre-1914 New York he had every reason to do so—but forgot that one of the resources we want children to acquire from their education is the ability to put up with estrangement from their fellows when sufficient intellectual or moral reasons demand it.