The article takes a brief but critical look at John Dewey's version of pragmatism, his contribution to philosophical scholarship generally as well as at his theory and practice of liberalism. That Dewey still has strong influence on many contemporary educationalists can hardly be doubted; however, it is argued that the legends built over the years around his name — that he was a philosopher of "freedom" and of "the common man" — are, on the whole, false.

N.C. BHATTACHARYA*

Demythologizing John Dewey

The title of this paper may appear a little peculiar but it sums up what I intend to say. And what I am going to say may appear to some as high-handed or unkind, and if indeed I need an excuse I would say that many serious discussions as well as reappraisals of emotionally attractive positions take their start from troublesome questions.

I

John Dewey wrote a great deal on almost every aspect of education beginning several years before the publication of his significant paper "My Pedagogic Creed" in 1897 and ending with a contribution to UNESCO Symposium in 1951. The total body of his writing is enormous and also unsystematic. However, among these there are quite a few good length essays and book size volumes, with little or no pretence to be technically philosophical, which have most influenced and guided American educational thought and practice for several decades. It is not at all easy, let us admit, to read clear positions and educational recommendations even in these less difficult non-philosophical works. If you labour, for example, to determine what Dewey could have had precisely in his mind when he talked "about the province and office of the teacher", you will soon discover that within a very broad and equally loose framework he had at different times seen the role of the teacher in the classroom as that of a stage manager, a co-learner sharing in an activity, or as a guide and director like "the head carpenter".[1] This difference in emphasis — where matters are not more complicated — is understandable only if you set out to consider a particular work of his with some historical insight into the problems he had at that very moment before his mind, or the unnamed adversaries or unquoted works he was criticizing or attacking. This in itself is a difficult enterprise for those whose primary interest is in the precise formulation and examination of the underlying philosophical position that might have stimulated the mind of the educational thinker. On the other hand, many curriculum developers and teachers, for their part, do not ap-

*Dr. N.C. Bhattacharya is Professor of Philosophy of Education, The University of Alberta. He has been President of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society since 1973.

[1]See, N.C. Bhattacharya, "The Role of the Teacher in John Dewey's Educational Theory", *Alberta Journal of Educational Research,* Vol. XIII, No. 1, (March, 1967), pp. 33-42.

pear to be fully aware of the philosophical and other implications of their eager adoption of the so-called integrated programmes (viz., many varieties of social studies in schools) based on the Deweyan notion of "inquiry".

Unlike Russell and some other logical positivists or logical empiricists[2], Dewey firmly believed that one's educational proposals need not or should not be mere projections of arbitrary personal preferences, and suggested quite clearly that his own general recommendations about education were to be seen and worked out in the light of the "new philosophy of experience."[3] Now, this does not, in his case, present the highly complex problem of relating technical philosophical doctrines—by 'deducing' or 'drawing out' plausible conclusions from them— to educational aims and practices. For in Dewey's thinking there is a complete *conceptual identification* between philosophy and education. He uses the same set of concepts, namely, 'nature', 'experience', 'transaction', 'problematic situation', 'inquiry', 'intelligence', 'discovery', 'growth', etc., in formulating his technical philosophical doctrines and in explaining the business of education, and goes as far as to define philosophy as "the general theory of education."[4] This certainly eliminates one kind of problem, but clearly makes it imperative that one understands Dewey's philosophical concepts and theories quite clearly before attributing a definite meaning to any of his general educational proposals. I consider this rather unfortunate — for John Dewey was a man of many interesting ideas but a poor philosopher. His version of pragmatism (or instrumentation) never acquired at crucial points the intellectual depth of C.S. Peirce or the systematic rationality of C.I. Lewis. As I see it, sentimental attachment to Dewey's philosophical concepts and his educational slogans, which are all too evident in recent years in the writings of many educators and in at least two Canadian provincial Royal Commission reports on the future of education, can only help in preserving a pervasive climate which has not proved to be too helpful in the past. Without denying John Dewey what is. historically speaking, his due, we must begin to subject his works to the kind of scrutiny, that works which are believed to be important and influential, do deserve. This is a task, surprisingly enough, that has been left almost undone.

II

Several years ago in a detailed and documented survey of "Philosophical Scholarship in the United States, 1930-1960," Professor John Passmore, well-known for his works in the history of ideas and of philosophy, observed that:

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[2]P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (Chicago: Northwestern University, 1944), p. 727, also p. 729. Also, Herbert Feigl, "Aims of Education for Our Age of Science: Reflections of a Logical Empiricist", *Modern Philosophies and Education,* the Fifty-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, (1955), p. 304.

[3]John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 22.

[4]John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, Macmillan and Company, 1948), p. 383.

> Dewey's great American reputation is still a mystery to the philosophical world outside the United States, and more especially in England. No Englishman has written, or is likely to write, about Dewey as Gallie has written about Peirce; Bertrand Russell is the only Englishman to contribute — in a highly critical essay — to P.A. Schilpp's *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (1939) . . . Many British philosopers would think of Dewey's American reputation as a puzzling form of intellectual aberration, sociologically intelligible but philosophically mysterious . . .[5]

A.J. Ayer's *The Origins of Pragmatism* (Macmillan, London, 1968), a 347-page study of the philosophies of Peirce and James, mentions Dewey's name three times only in the "Introduction" and refers to him as one of the "publicists of the movement." Dewey's younger partner in the Pragmatic movement, C.I. Lewis has, in the meantime, acquired the status of a serious candidate for genuine philosophical criticism at home and abroad, and Oxford philosophers write about his contribution to logic and moral philosophy stressing the need for a good deal further and serious examination of his works.[6]

Dewey's philosophical doctrines which appear as most puzzling to the students of philosophy can be summed up quite easily and without needless details. In his view *experience* is the name of transaction between a living organism and its environing conditions. While *experience* is limited, and human experience more so, *nature* is much wider in extent. If this be so, how can one empirically postulate that *all* natural existences have their own quality of immediacy? With the myth of the *given,* which can only be *had* or *felt,* but never known, how can one go about formulating a descriptive metaphysics (What does 'description' mean?), and call it the "ground map of the universe"? In other words, his metaphysical position suffers from lack of internal consistency. While it is recognized that Dewey's theory of inquiry is not intended to be what is ordinarily meant by epistemology, it remains in part unintelligible. In Dewey's view inquiry is initiated by brute existential situations (which are 'confused', not that the individual encountering a problematic situation is the one who alone is confused), but how does the result of inquiry — "objects of knowledge" — which can have no direct reference to 'brute existences' effect existential transformation to those unknowable *given* or brute materials? Stated in simple language it looks a strange philosophical doctrine: What is known as a result of inquiry is not the originally given that caused the inquiry in the first place; what is given in direct experience is never known but somehow becomes transformed. The object of knowledge is not finding out the truth about matters that matter. "The true object of knowledge," Dewey insists, "resides in the consequences of directed action." Truth is what works, what solves the problem or what has some practical utility. The "Dewey Fideists" may call it a vulgar interpretation of John Dewey's philosophical position, but none has so far been able to write, in Professor Passmore's words, "a

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[5]John Passmore, "Philosophical Scholarship in the United States, 1930 - 1960", *Philosophy,* The Princeton Studies, Humanistic Scholarship in America, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 122-123.

[6]See, for example, Anthony Quinton, "Rational American", *The New York Review of Books,* (July 23, 1970), pp. 41-45. See also, footnote 10.

clear coherent account of Dewey's logical and metaphysical views which might persuade Dewey's critics that they are wrong."[7]

One of Dewey's most favourite subjects must have been ethics, a subject about which he wrote throughout his life. He conceived of general philosophy as practical and ethical, and much of his concern with social and educational problems was fundamentally of a moral nature. Dewey's ethical theory is apparently very simple: He maintained that value judgements of all kinds were empirically justifiable, that, in other words, ethics could be wholly based on science. While in his turn Dewey criticized almost every other moral philosopher, including his well-known American contemporaries, R.B. Perry and C.L. Stevenson, his own views were found to be so ambiguous that a large group of distinguished American philosophers — Morton White, Sidney Hook, William K. Frankena, Ray Lepley, and many others — produced significantly different interpretations of Dewey's own reconstruction of moral philosophy. The puzzling factors here are of different kinds.

Take, for example, the now famous Chapter X entitled, "The Construction of Good" in *The Quest for Certainty*. In explaining the nature and procedure of inquiry about values, Dewey wrote:

> Judgments about values are judgments about the conditions and results of experienced objects; judgments about that which should regulate the formation of our desires, affections and enjoyments.[8]

And then, still continuing on the same theme he stated on the following page:

> If we know the conditions under which the act of liking, of desire and enjoyment, takes place, we are in a position to know what are the consequences of that act. The difference between the desired and the desirable, admired and the admirable, becomes effective at just this point.[9]

Now the question is: What does Dewey want us to inquire into? In one passage he speaks of inquiring into the conditions and consequences of "the act of liking, of desire", in the other value judgments are said to be judgments about the conditions and consequences of "experienced objects". But *an act of liking* and *an experienced object* are clearly two different matters; and an analysis of the former does not always appear to be quite relevant in determining whether a particular experienced object is desirable or not. The point is of philosophical importance; it cannot simply be dismissed as another example of Dewey's graceless language.

The other puzzling factor is much deeper. No one can possibly deny that scientific knowledge can function in value judgments. By scientifically inquiring into the causes and consequences of an act of liking or an experienced object (or of both) we can know about the likely effects. But what sort of effects must the particular act of liking or an experienced

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[7]John Passmore, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

[8]John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), p. 265.

[9]*Ibid*, p. 266.

object have upon us in order to be judged desirable? Can this question be answered at all unless we are willing to admit some basic principles or ideals, some conception of the good? But Dewey opposed all sorts of fixed ideals or basic principles, and tried to get around with the notion of "growth" or its more generalized version "the general well-being". But what about the *principle* of "growth" itself or "general well-being" which we are always supposed to promote? Dewey could not avoid this dilemma; and so for him and his followers it had been a merry-go-round with growth and further growth, and still further, thereby making the contents of moral judgments a special kind of utterance that could be validated only after the next round, i.e., in the future. On this subject, I have not known many educational philosophers mentioning the works and efforts of C.I. Lewis, who, disagreeing with Dewey on the notion of intrinsic value but on the whole adopting the Deweyan procedure, succeeded in formulating a more satisfactory basis for valuation, and in consequence, for educational direction. On the whole subject of pragmatic ethics, William K. Frankena has remarked, "One may also ask whether anyone has done better than Lewis has, all things considered."[10]

Dewey's eagerness to establish logical continuity between science and morals by abolishing the "traditional dualism" which he described as an "intellectual scandal" lured him into further ambiguities. On the one hand, he talked of science as "itself a value"[11] and of scientific method, the only method of intelligent action, as "an ultimate value".[12] On the other hand, the method of science and "the method of intelligence" became synonyms; and "intelligence" being already loaded with such nicer moral and intellectual dispositions or character-traits as open-mindedness, integrity of purpose, wide sympathy, and others, made it impossible, logically speaking, for the scientific method to promote any wrong, or for that matter an intelligent person to act in a wicked manner.[13] An important distinction was lost.

John Dewey's philosophical works are replete with criticisms of other philosophers. However, if his comments are taken uncritically one may come to believe that many of his philosophical predecessors were intellectual villains of one sort or other. In his critical outbursts against Plato and Aristotle, for example, Dewey hardly ever paid any attention to textual

[10]William K. Frankena, "Ethical Theory", *Philosophy,* The Princeton Studies, *op. cit.,* p. 391. See also, Alexander Sesonske, *Value and Obligation: The Foundations of an Empirical Ethical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, Galaxy Books, 1964), pp. 35-67.

[11]John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation,* International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, Vol. II, No. 4 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 66.

[12]John Dewey, "Experience, Knowledge and Value: A Rejoinder", P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 2nd. edition), 1951, p. 594.

[13]See, N.C. Bhattacharya, "The Concept of 'Intelligence' in John Dewey's Philosophy and Educational Theory", *Educational Theory,* Vol. 19, No. 2, (Spring, 1969), pp. 185-195. Dewey's attempt to load 'intelligence' with all the virtues can be understood in the light of prevailing beliefs in the early 1900's in America which associated talent or intelligence with goodness and the lack of it with viciousness.

details in their works or to the problems of translation and interpretation. J.H. Randall, Jr., who had himself written on Aristotle and who had been quite sympathetic to Dewey, admitted in his article in the Schilpp volume "that the total impression he (Dewey) gives of Aristotelian thought is nevertheless false."[14] Serious studies of Greek thought by Cornford, Cassirer, Jaeger, Burnet and others do suggest that Dewey's complaint that Greek thinkers always tended to denigrate the *vita activa* in favor of the *vita contemplativa* was far too excessive.

Dewey's misunderstanding of Kant's moral concerns is almost incomprehensible. In *German Philosophy and politics* (1915), written during the First World War but before America's entry, he made Kant's doctrine of the two worlds along with the idealism of Fichte and Hegel responsible for the rise of Prussian militarism. He reissued this book without any textual change but with a new introduction "The One World of Hitler's National Socialism" during the Second World War (1942). Dewey was unusually fond of drawing practical conclusions from complex metaphysical doctrines, and on this subject he surprisingly overlooked C.I. Lewis's paper "Facts, Systems and the Unity of the World"[15] published in 1917 which was a critique of idealist metaphysics but at the same time a cool rebuttal of the popular belief that German idealism was primarily responsible for the First World War. While Kant's moral maxims can be differently interpreted, we are well aware that contemporary moral philosophers are repeatedly going back to Kant on the question of the nature of moral principles, and to learn from what he had to say also about the dignity of man. In Russell's view, for example, Kant "was a Liberal both in politics and theology; he sympathized with the French Revolution until the Reign of Terror, and was a believer in democracy."[16] It is indeed difficult to see what Dewey found in Kant's philosophy or in Kant the man, who said: "Let us provide for our happiness, let us go into the garden and work", to judge him the way he did. Dewey must have been unaware of the fact that in his old age Kant wrote a treatise on *Perpetual Peace* (1795) advocating "a federation of free States, bound together by a covenant forbidding war", which as Russell pointed out made him very unpopular in Hitler's Germany.[17] For his part, John Dewey deliberated for years about America's joining the League of Nations, eventually declaring in 1923, "for our staying out of it."

Dewey's treatment of Marx is superficial. He failed to see the similarity between his conceptions of the purpose of inquiry and of the role of philosophical criticism in social life and the views held by Marx. This similarity has been pointed out by Russell in his article on Dewey in the Schilpp

[14]P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey,* p. 102.

[15]See, *Collected Papers of C.I. Lewis,* ed., John Goheen and John Mothershead (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969). For an interesting account of "the intellectual roots of the Third Reich", see, William L. Shirer's popular work, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), pp. 97-113.

[16]Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1965),*p. 678.

[17]*Ibid,* p. 684.

volume. In his advocacy of "public socialism" and in recognizing the phenomenon of alienation and its effects in industrialized society — in Chapters VI and VII respectively of *Individualism Old and New* (1929) — Dewey came close to some of Marx's astute observations. However, he remained opposed to far-reaching or radical social changes, and continued in believing that the method of science or intelligence was quite capable of taking care of the social problems as they might arise only to note, rather ruefully, in 1936 while commenting on Bertrand Russell's *Religion and Science* that, "After all, the scientific temper, the method of intelligent experiment, made but little progress even during the period when it was .... winning technical triumphs."[18] Dewey remained a life-long critic of the theory of economic determinism and of Marxist political theory. But, at the same time, he pleaded for a "socialized economy" believing that, "Only by economic revision can the sound element in the older individualism — equality and opportunity — be made a reality."[19] He hoped that this revision in the case of U.S.A. can come through peaceful transition. That day is yet to come!

Dewey rejected older political liberalism and sturdy individualism, the type of views advocated, for example, by people like John Stuart Mill, as pre-technological and therefore unsuitable to the conditions of his contemporary American society. His new liberalism, on the other hand, sought to establish the rights and liberties of the individual on reconstructed "social values" of a democratic society which would make, "the widest contribution to the interests of all — or at least of the great majority."[20] He thus formulated the liberal code in which:

> any merely individual right must yield to the general welfare. As long as freedom of thought and speech is claimed as a merely individual right, it will give way, as do other merely personal claims, when it is, or is successfully represented to be, in opposition to the general welfare.[21]

It is not difficult to show, I believe, that this doctrine of reconstructed liberalism has some of the essential ingredients of what has come to be known as 'totalitarian democracy'.[22] In practice, as critics have pointed out, this doctrine has a much stronger concern for social conformism than for personal liberty or for the development of individualism.

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[18]John Dewey, *Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 173.

[19]John Dewey, *Individualism, Old and New* (New York: Minton, Batch and Company, 1930), p. 72.

[20]John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), p. 79.

[21]*Ibid,* p. 66.

[22]See, Arthur E. Murphy, "John Dewey and American Liberalism", *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. LVII (1962), pp. 420-436; N.C. Bhattacharya, "John Dewey's Instrumentalism, Democratic Ideal and Education", *Educational Theory,* Vol. 18, No. 1, (Winter, 1968), pp. 60-72.

IV

If Dewey was somewhat careless in his study of the works of other philosophers, he was only impressionistic in his observation of social and political trends. His writings on Japan and China, and the recently published (in *The Dewey Newsletter,* Southern Illinois University, Vol. VI, No. 2, October, 1972) confidential report he wrote ("after getting into touch with the element in China that may be considered radical") to Col. Drysdale, military attache in the American legation in China, telling him that China was, "less in danger of Bolshevism than any country on the globe", bear ample testimony to his lack of penetrating insight into social trends, tensions, and problems.[23] At least on one other occasion, John Dewey worked secretly for U.S. Military Intelligence — among a group of Polish immigrants in Philadelphia during the summer months of 1918 — and filed reports on fellow American citizens.[24] These must appear in retrospect as strange deeds on the part of a liberal educator who in his public utterances was urging for free flow of information, public participation, open discussions, etc., as preconditions of liberalism and democratic socialism. But not so to some American followers of John Dewey. William W. Brickman, for example, has observed recently:

> It is possible that recommendations of this eight-page report may have had some impact on the development of post-war United States policy with regard to the reconsitution of Poland. Probably, few philosophers have had the opportunity that Dewey had to participate directly in the process of leading to the formation of international policy.[25]

In more recent years, through C.I.A. sponsored funding agencies and such endeavours as the "Project Camelot", American "scholars" have had similar opportunities in participating "directly" in the formation of American international policy. That John Dewey, the liberal and moral conscience of his time, was not quite averse to this kind of political athleticism many may find surprising.

But why? It is indeed more surprising that a philosopher who claimed that the business of the philosophers had always been to clarify men's minds on the pressing problems of their own times did not write anything at all addressing himself directly to the racial problems in American society or on the question of racial segregation in the nation's schools. In an essay entitled, "Dewey's Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy", Wayne A.R. Leys writes confidently that "it is, of course, possible to catalogue the positions Dewey took with reference to controversial issues of his time".

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[23]This report, after being declassified on July 22, 1960, is now available at the National Archive's Record Group No. 59.

[24]John Dewey, "Confidential Report: Conditions Among the Poles in the United States", in *John Dewey: A Centennial Bibliography* by M.H. Thomas, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 53.

[25]W.W. Brickman, "Dewey's Social and Political Commentary", in Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *Guide to the Works of John Dewey* (Arcturus Books Edition, 1972), p. 232.

His list does not contain any reference to the racial issue.[26] How does one explain this lapse on the part of the "Philosopher of the Common Man"? He certainly had been aware of Alexis de Tocqueville's dark warnings on the consequences of racial discrimination in *Democracy in America.* Dewey lived through many distressing incidents of racial strife in American society including widespread rioting across the nation as in the "Red Summer of 1919". Why was he—the radical liberal and the "Philosopher of Freedom"—silent on this subject? Or, could it be that John Dewey had all the humanitarian passions but dared not show them?

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Myths die hard but not many of them are wholly true; some are false.

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[26]*Ibid,* p. 146. A close check of the "checklists" in this volume as well as the contents and indices of the Schilpp volume, Cremin's *The Transformation of the School* will confirm this point. For a detailed discussion of the subject, see, Everett Griffin, "A Critical Re-assessment of John Dewey as an Educational Philosopher and Social Reformer", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, The University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. Also available at the Dewey Studies Center, Carbondale, Ill., U.S.A.