

# John Dewey *speaks*

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Despite the efforts of his critics to disparage him, John Dewey (1859-1952) remains the most influential philosopher and educator in United States history. Primarily he was a philosopher of democracy and the American experience.

His philosophy of life has been called pragmatic, experimental, humanistic, or empirical. To him the essence of life was active, thoughtful, purposeful, shared experiences for the common good. Although he focused on the present, he recognized the historical dimensions of life and was concerned with the future. He stressed the centrality of change and was concerned that man shape his environment as well as being shaped by it. He insisted that means coincide with ends. The reconstruction of human relationships and institutions was uppermost in his thinking. These concerns culminated in his perception of education as growth and as the enrichment of experience.

Born on a farm in Vermont, he attended schools there and graduated from the University of Vermont. After teaching school, he enrolled in Johns Hopkins University, where he obtained his doctorate. Subsequently he taught at the University of Michigan and the University of Minnesota before going to the University of Chicago. There he and his wife founded the famed Laboratory School. In 1904, he joined the faculty of Columbia University where he remained until his retirement in 1930. He helped to found the teacher union movement, was the first president of the American Association of University Professors, and was an early president of the American Psychological Association. He travelled widely abroad, interpreting his philosophy.

His thinking is germane to our world today as he speaks:

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## ON THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY . . .

"While saints sit and ponder, burly sinners rule the world."

"Philosophy renews itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men."

"From one point of view . . . the chief role of philosophy is to bring to consciousness, in an intellectualized form, or in the form of problems, the most important shocks and inherent problems of complex and changing societies."

"There is a kind of music of ideas that appeals, apart from any question of empirical verification, to the minds of thinkers, who derive an emotional satisfaction from an imaginative . . . synthesis of ideas obtainable by them in no other way. The objective side of this phenomenon is the role of philosophy in bringing to a focus of unity and clarity the ideas that are at work in a given period more or less independently of one another, in separate cultural streams."

"Significant history is lived in the imagination of man, and philosophy is a further extension of the imagination into its own prior achievements."

"When the belief that knowledge is active and operative takes hold of men, the ideal realm is no longer something aloof and separate; it is rather that collection of imagined possibilities that stimulates men to new efforts and realizations. . . . The prime function of philosophy is that of rationalizing the possibilities of experience, especially collective human experience."

## ON INDIVIDUALITY OR SELF-REALIZATION . . .

"Individuality is at first spontaneous and unshaped; it is a potentiality, a capacity for development. Even so, it is a unique manner of acting in and with a world of objects and persons. It is not something complete in itself, like a closet in a house or a secret drawer in a desk filled with treasures that are waiting to be bestowed on the world. Since individuality is a distinctive way of feeling the impacts of the world and of showing a preferential bias in response to those impacts, it develops into shape and form only through interaction with actual conditions; it is no more complete in itself than a painter's tube of paint without relation to the canvas."

"The kind of self which is formed through action which is faithful to relations with others will be a fuller and broader self than one which is cultivated in isolation from or in opposition to the purposes and needs of others. In contrast, the kind of self which results from generous breadth of interest may be said alone to constitute a development and fulfillment of self, while the other way stunts and starves selfhood by cutting it off from connections necessary to its growth."

"Inquiry institutes new environing conditions that occasion new problems. What the organism learns during this process produces new powers that make new demands upon the environment. In short, as special problems are resolved, new ones tend to emerge. There is no such thing as a final settlement. . . ."

"Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value, is religious in quality."



## ON EXPERIENCE . . .

"Shared experience is the greatest of human goods."

"The nature of experience can be understood only by noting that it includes an active and a passive element peculiarly combined. On the active hand, experience is *trying*—a meaning which is made explicit in the connected term experiment. On the passive, it is *undergoing*."

"Experience is not a veil that shuts men off from nature; it is a means of penetrating continually further into the heart of nature. Experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature."

"We do not merely have to repeat the past, or wait for accidents to force change upon us. We *use* our past experiences to construct new and better ones in the future. The very fact of experience thus includes the process by which it directs itself in its own betterment."

"Any experience is miseducative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience."

"We need a cautionary and directive word, like experience, to remind us that the world which is lived, suffered and enjoyed as well as logically thought of, has the last word in all human inquiries and surmises."

"Nothing but the best, the richest and fullest experience possible, is good enough for man."

"So act as to increase the meaning of present experience."

## ON WAYS OF KNOWING: ART AND SCIENCE . . .

"Genuine intellectual integrity is found in experimental knowing."

"Knowledge is not something separate and self-sufficing, but is involved in the process by which life is sustained and evolved."

"Knowledge falters when imagination clips its wings or fears to use them."

"Thinking is pre-eminently an art; knowledge and propositions which are the products of thinking are works of art, as much so as statuary and symphonies."

"Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reenforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is."

"Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics, and insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration."

"Of any artistic act and product it may be said both that it is inevitable in its rightness, that nothing in it can be altered without altering all, and that its occurrence is spontaneous, unexpected, fresh, unpredictable."

"Modern science no longer tries to find some fixed form or essence behind each profession of change. Rather the experimental method tries to break down apparent fixities and to induce changes."

"Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination."

## ON DEMOCRACY . . .

"A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."

"Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being, irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, or material or cultural wealth."

"Democracy is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general, but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished."

"The democratic faith in human equality is belief that every human being, independent of the quantity or range of his personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has."

"Merely legal guarantees of the civil liberties of free belief, free expression, free assembly are of little avail if in daily life freedom of communication, of give and take of ideas, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred. These destroy the essential condition of the democratic way of living even more effectively than open coercion. . . ."

". . . democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness."



## ON EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRACY . . .

"Such a (democratic) society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder."

"A progressive society counts individual variations as precious, since it finds in them the means of its own growth."

"We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference."

"The criterion of the value of a school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact."

"To know what one is to do and to move to do it promptly and by use of the requisite means is to be disciplined. . . . Discipline is positive."

"The essentials of method are therefore identical with the essentials of reflection. They are first that the pupil have a genuine situation of experience—that there be a continuous activity in which he is interested for its own sake; secondly, that a genuine problem develop within this situation as a stimulus to thought; third, that he possess the information and make the observations needed to deal with it; fourth, that suggested solutions occur to him which he shall be responsible for developing in an orderly way; fifth, that he has opportunity and occasion to test his ideas by application, to make their meaning clear and to discover for himself their validity."

## ON THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE . . .

"Memory of the past, observation of the present, foresight of the future are indispensable. But they are indispensable to a present liberation, an enriching growth of action."

"We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by the grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, rectifying, and expanding the heritage of values we have received, that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it."

"The critic who is not as sensitive to signs of change as to the recurrent and enduring, uses the criterion of tradition without understanding its nature, and appeals to the past for patterns and models without being aware that every past was once the immanent future of its past and is now the past, not absolutely, but of the change which constitutes the present."

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