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Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education

John Dewey

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Dewey sought to at once synthesize, criticize, and expand upon the democratic (or proto-democratic) educational philosophies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Plato. He saw Rousseau's philosophy as overemphasizing the individual and Plato's philosophy as overemphasizing the society in which the individual lived.

In Democracy and Education, Dewey argues that the primary ineluctable facts of the birth and death of each one of the constituent members in a social group determine the necessity of education. On one hand, there is the contrast between the immaturity of the new-born members of the group (its future sole representatives) and the maturity of the adult members who possess the knowledge and customs of the group. On the other hand, there is the necessity that these immature members be not merely physically preserved in adequate numbers, but that they be initiated into the interests, purposes, information, skill, and practices of the mature members: otherwise the group will cease its characteristic life.

“Each clause is a tightly packed and organized statement. Mr. Dewey supplies nothing that he thinks the reader might supply himself….The result is not information or propaganda but a book which is the mature wisdom of the finest and most powerful intellect devoted to the future of American civilization.” -New Republic

“The author’s aim here is to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply those ideas to the problems of education. Constructive aims and methods of public education as seen from this point of view are indicated. The author connects the growth of democracy with the development of the experimental method in the sciences, with evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences and with the industrial reorganization.” -Boston Transcript

“This is a period of reconstruction and Dewey is its prophet. He has already been termed one of the ‘major prophets of today’; it seems hardly too much to conceive that the twenty-first century will study three great stages in educational theory, Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey.” -The Dial

“The book is a very stimulating source of ideas for anyone who wishes to systemize his general thinking on educational theory. The book has in it very few discussions of concrete educational situations. It is in no sense of the word a book of methods or a book of concrete prescriptions about school activities. It is a philosophy of education rather than a handbook on school organization.” -Elementary School Journal

“Professor John Dewey in ‘Democracy and Education’ presents for the first time in a unified form the philosophic foundation of his educational theory. His book is itself a most brilliant example of the function of philosophy, for he gives us a transvaluation of educational ideals and methods in the light of a theory of knowledge of which he has been the chief originator.” -Independent

“A notable contribution to the philosophy of education.” -The Nation

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