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Dewey's Troubling Legacy

My advice to all parents is . . . anything that Wm. Heard
Kilpatrick & Jhn. Dewey say do, don't do.

— Flannery O'Connor

JOHN DEWEY'S NINETIETH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION was an international event. Jay Martin writes, "Salutations arrived from all over the world. Programs of speeches about Dewey's importance were organized in Canada, Denmark, England, France, Holland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, and Turkey." A three-day symposium was held in Tokyo; commemorative events were held in Mexico and Istanbul as well. In the United States, a fund was established to raise \$90,000 to contribute to causes of his choice and a three-day birthday event was held in New York City in which over "one hundred schools and learned societies held programs of tribute to Dewey." Dewey, with characteristic humility, said afterwards that he had been uncomfortable with all the "fuss and bother."¹

By all accounts, Dewey was a benevolent man. My interest in Dewey began in graduate school, and grew out of my interest in the American founding period. When I came to realize how important the educational views of the founders were to the success of their political project, I then turned my attention to Dewey, to try to determine what



his educational revolution meant to the original founding intentions. During that time I was introduced to a member of the faculty at my university, who as a child, had delivered eggs for Dewey, produced on the philosopher's farm in Burlington, Vermont. His memory of Dewey, not surprisingly, was that of a kind, gentle, and patient man.

What, then has happened? How has Dewey become the *bête noire* of traditionalist educational reformers and why do many of his advocates often find themselves in the role of defending him? To be sure, Dewey is not only controversial, but is regarded with antipathy by some, including the individual who, with overblown rhetoric, told me that Dewey is "the Antichrist!" How do we explain this controversial legacy that only seems to grow more intense with each passing year, and with each drop in the academic performance of American students?

The beginning of such an inquiry must be recognition of the extent of Dewey's influence today. Indeed, in this period of crisis in American schools, a sound understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of American education is impossible without a firm grasp of John Dewey's contribution. Although the ideas of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Dr. Benjamin Rush, and others of the founding generation still enjoy moderate influence here and there in American schools and universities, the prestige of Dewey's thought has long superseded that of the founders.² He remains "a towering figure."³

Revivals of Dewey's thought appear at regular intervals, the latest signaled by the completion in 1990 of the thirty-seven-volume compendium of Dewey's works by the University of Southern Illinois Press,⁴ a commendable endeavor that has made Dewey's prolific but disparate body of writings more accessible than ever. Additional evidence of continued interest in Dewey's relevance includes the republication of Sidney Hook's 1939 uncritical apologetic for Dewey's thought, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (1995), Alan

Ryan's *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (1997), Jennifer Welchman's *Dewey's Ethical Thought* (1995), James Campbell's *Understanding John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence* (1995), Robert B. Westbrook's *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991), and Jay Martin's biography, *The Education of John Dewey* (2003).⁵ *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation* offers fresh formulations of Dewey's thought in education, ethics, psychology, and philosophy.⁶ One of the boldest uses of Dewey is the educational theorist Alfie Kohn's *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards"* (1999), in which the author employs Dewey to muster resistance to the gravitational pull back to traditional pedagogy.⁷ Dewey's influence, especially his romantic views of human nature and his insistence on "community," is also deeply imprinted on another of Kohn's books, *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community* (1996).⁸ In a general introduction to Dewey's philosophy, Raymond Boisvert argues that the political, social, economic, and educational challenges of the new millennium give fresh immediacy to Dewey's attempt to construct a new foundation for democracy.⁹ Similar appeals are frequently made in the many psychology and educational journals and conferences that populate the academic landscape.

At times, such calls for a revival of Deweyan approaches have a tone of outright reverence. An article on Dewey and moral education employs a telling, if odd, metaphor: "The Crux of Our Inspiration."¹⁰ Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, in *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other* (2003), recommends Dewey's *My Pedagogical Creed* as a "provocative and incisive series of essays" offering "guiding principles about education, teaching and curriculum, child development, and the relationship between school and society."¹¹ In an appeal for innovative school reform, *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse*, author Phillip Schlechty recommends that education leaders familiarize themselves with "classic" literature "such

as the works of Shakespeare and the Bible—and with the writings of profound thinkers in the field of education such as John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and Bertrand Russell.”¹² An article in the leading education periodical *Education Week* went so far as to recommend Dewey’s ideas as a guide for helping students to assimilate the tragedy of September 11, 2001.¹³

At the same time, there have appeared a few volumes tying Dewey to American educational decline. For example, educational theorist Kieran Egan’s *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning* explores the contemporary dominance of progressive education and its deteriorating effect on U.S. schools.¹⁴ In *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform*, respected educational historian Dianne Ravitch notes John Dewey’s influence in generating at least two of the misconceptions that now cripple American education: the use of schools to solve social and political problems and the depreciation of academics in favor of assorted “activities.”¹⁵ In *Class Warfare: Besieged Schools, Bewildered Parents, Betrayed Kids, and the Attack on Excellence*, political scientist J. Martin Rochester points to Dewey as the source of most contemporary abuses in education policy; and Charles J. Sykes’s *Dumbing Down Our Kids* is an exposé of the problems of contemporary education and their source in the progressive education movement.¹⁶

The Elements of Dewey’s Thought

Unfortunately, despite his iconic status, Dewey is rarely read and his work is poorly understood in public schools and in colleges of education. Future teachers often learn a little bit “about” Dewey the man and educator, but they are never given the opportunity to assess critically the Deweyan ideas that underlie their classes and permeate their professional organizations. Educational bureaucrats, activists, and accrediting agencies do not seem to appreciate the source of the ideas that inspire their work, either. Political scientists,

who might be expected to have the training and objectivity to furnish a different perspective on Dewey's educational thought, usually concentrate on his political and social philosophy, mostly found in such volumes as *Democracy and Education* (1915), *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), and *Freedom and Culture* (1939). As a political and social philosopher, Dewey is famous for his advocacy of contemporary liberalism, if not socialism. For instance, he argued for greater government involvement in society at large because our enjoyment of equality depends upon such intervention.¹⁷ In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), he contends that freedom is meaningless if government does not actively intervene in the private sector to enable its citizens to enjoy that freedom. Freedom "from oppressive legal and political measures" is not sufficient for the enjoyment of liberty, writes Dewey. What men need is a social "environment" that will help them obtain their "wants" as well as their needs (HNC, 305–6).

This focus on Dewey's social and political philosophy, however, brings only one dimension of his work into view. It neglects Dewey's own assertion that in order to fully appreciate his philosophy it should be read as a complete system. Given the breadth of Dewey's work, this is admittedly a difficult task. Dewey explicitly argues, nonetheless, that all philosophy—like life in general—should be considered as a whole. Focusing only upon artificially delimited aspects of his thought makes it difficult to see the larger picture.

In fact, for the educator and the political scientist alike, studying Dewey's educational philosophy offers a unique advantage, for it is in his educational thought that all the dimensions of his philosophy intersect. In other words, for Dewey, all philosophy is, in a sense, educational philosophy, because it is only in education that all branches of philosophy find their consummation. Education was Dewey's passion, the field in which his political aspirations, moral philosophy, and psychological innovations found their purpose. In-

deed, Dewey's instrumentalism teaches precisely that philosophy is so much wasted time and effort if it is not "useful."

Dewey may have hoped to influence intellectual life through other dimensions of his work, but he expected to change the world through his educational thought. In order to do so, he explains in *Democracy and Education*, he must "contend not only with the inertia of existing educational traditions," but also with the opposition of those who control business and government, since they depend upon the educational system to produce workers and citizens (DE, 319). Such philosophical and political reconstruction is essential, Dewey believes, to preserve the American democratic experiment—indeed, to save it from destruction. In order to survive, American democracy must be transformed by a revolution in education, followed by a social and economic revolution. One cannot occur without the other, but education must first be revolutionized because it is "the process through which the needed transformation may be accomplished" (DE, 332).

Dewey is often described as a philosophical pragmatist, a designation he shares with two other American philosophers, William James and Charles Peirce. He acknowledges in the closing pages of *Democracy and Education* that "[t]he theory of the method of knowing which is advanced in these pages may be termed pragmatic" (DE, 344). Dewey argues that education—even more than politics—should promote the practical over the abstract. To pursue change through politics can be frustratingly slow; using education to change the world is far more efficient. The ultimate result of such change is political and social transformation.

Yet, ironically, Dewey's educational system has every appearance of being grossly impractical. The more one reads Dewey, the more one is forced to conclude that his self-styled pragmatism is not so much a "practical" choice as it is a convenient cover for his politics. Dewey's philosophy, then, must always be interpreted in light

of his preoccupation with social change. Indeed, in some places Dewey chooses the more militant term “instrumentalism” rather than “pragmatism” to describe his philosophy because the former signals a stance more decidedly opposed to the ideas that retard progress. In his view, traditional notions of human nature, of the structure and process of democracy, and of the nature of truth itself all must be reworked (DE, 331).

Later in his career, Dewey characterized his work as “experimental,” and this term may well be the most appropriate of all, since it points to the *anti*-utilitarianism evident in his thought. There are times when Dewey’s unrelenting passion for discrediting and demolishing all that is traditional compromises his pragmatism to the point that his philosophy descends to nihilism. Dewey is intent on razing the traditional landscape as a prerequisite to building anew, which is why he is often more concerned with undermining tradition and conventional religion than he is with finding more efficient ways for students to learn.

Indeed, Dewey’s thought is characterized by hostility, not only to traditional religion, but to all abstract or metaphysical ideas, even though his own writing is at times irremediably abstract. He argues, for example, that belief in objective truth and authoritative notions of good and evil are harmful to students. Dewey’s ostensible rationale for so strongly opposing such ideas is that they are obstacles to students’ intellectual and moral growth. Dewey’s real opposition, though, may arise from his concern that a belief in objective truth is an impediment to the promulgation of his own philosophical ideas. Indeed, for someone so ostensibly concerned that students think for themselves, Dewey can be surprisingly dogmatic.

It is a commonplace these days for this or that educational reform to be promoted because it is “for the good of students”—and to expect that everyone will accept such a claim at face value. A study of Dewey’s thought, however, compels us to be suspicious of this kind of rhetoric. It is not going too far to say that, in the final

analysis, Dewey is not most interested in the good of students but rather the successful promotion of a political program. If that political program also happens to be for the academic and moral benefit of students—as he undoubtedly thought it was—then that is a happy coincidence.

Rousseau in the Classroom

The single most important influence on progressive education, both European and American, has been Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational treatise *Emile*, which was itself a reaction to conventional pedagogy. Dewey, like other reformers, was profoundly influenced by Rousseau. In *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915), Dewey notes approvingly that the eighteenth-century French philosopher is "very recently beginning to enjoy respect" (ST, 290). Some have even hailed Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916) as "the most notable contribution to pedagogy since Rousseau's *Emile*."¹⁸ Dewey shares Rousseau's optimistic view that human beings are basically benevolent and human nature is easily molded, and he believes with Rousseau that moral education designed to subdue human nature by overcoming vice is harmful to students. Dewey shares Rousseau's rejection, not only of tradition, but also of conventional religion, although he does not share the private nonconformist religious aspirations to which Rousseau occasionally admitted. Dewey adopts Rousseau's "child-centered" curriculum—as educational reformers would later call it—and he further follows Rousseau's classroom strategy insofar as the curriculum is only *apparently* centered on the child: the child's learning environment is in reality a grand manipulation on the part of his tutor or teacher. Rousseau disdained educational goals and ideals just as Dewey would later do. In both cases, the opposition to such standards is supposedly for the sake of immediacy and relevance in the learning process. For both

educators as well, learning largely consists of hands-on experience.

Both Rousseau and Dewey depreciate the importance of books for students, in Rousseau's case at least until well into adolescence. With Dewey, it is not clear when or if books should ever become a primary component of a student's education. Rousseau urges that his student Emile learn a useful trade; Dewey also emphasizes vocational education, primarily because he finds it easy to manage that particular learning experience in the interest of preparing students to be social reformers. Finally, both Dewey's and Rousseau's educational thought is motivated by a belief that education should promote freedom, although neither thinker unambiguously defines what freedom means. Dewey's only serious disagreement with Rousseau has to do with the latter's individualistic educational plan: for Dewey, education must be a predominantly social experience.

In *Schools of Tomorrow*, Dewey concedes that "Rousseau said, as well as did, many foolish things," but he nevertheless finds Rousseau to be an inspirational figure, judging by the prominence the French philosopher enjoys in that book (ST, 1). Dewey does, however, acknowledge an embarrassing fact of Rousseau's legacy. He writes, "Rousseau, while he was writing his *Emile*, was allowing his own children to grow up entirely neglected by their parents, abandoned in a foundling asylum" (ST, 60). Rousseau's life thus highlights an uncomfortable fact about progressive educational reform through the past decades: there often exists a disturbing split between abstract theory and actual experience. For an idea to be considered "good," it is not necessary that its proponent has actually practiced it or lived it out—or that it even be proved in the classroom.

Characteristics and Significance of Dewey's Writing

Several observations about Dewey's style of writing and argumentation are helpful in order to best understand his ideas. First, it has often been recognized and almost as often forgiven that Dewey's carelessness in syntax and logic frequently mars his philosophical discourse and frustrates the reader. He is also redundant, both within a given work and from one book or article to the next. It is possible that Dewey adopted this style for rhetorical purposes, employing repetition to hammer home his argument to as wide an audience as possible; the ideas and arguments that he most often repeats are usually his most important.

The vagueness that characterizes Dewey's most cherished concepts usually proves most frustrating to his readers. Alan Ryan kindly understates the problem, suggesting that Dewey's writing is "deliberately unstylish." Another of Dewey's intellectual biographers, Robert Westbrook, downplays Dewey's poor style, dryly commenting that "precision and clarity often escaped him." Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes called Dewey's writing "inarticulate," and William James said it was "damnable; you might even say God-damnable."¹⁹ Political philosopher and journalist Hannah Arendt found Dewey's thought too divorced from real life, and she complained of the ambiguity of his thought: "What makes it so difficult to review this philosophy is that it is equally hard to agree or to disagree with it."²⁰ Dewey himself admitted late in life that he had "used language *ad hoc*."²¹ Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain not only notes the "ambiguities" in Dewey's writing, but also suggests "a disastrous confusion of ideas" therein.²² Political scientist Leo R. Ward admits that John Dewey is "our most influential American philosopher of education." Ward explains, however, that it is difficult to understand so much of Dewey's thought because "it is difficult to say for sure in what Dewey believed." Ward continues, "This confident man, exuding and inspiring confidence, may be seen as a man all his life in search of himself."²³

Perhaps, though, it is this very vagueness and confusion that has made Dewey's work so resilient. The obscurity of his writing has conferred upon Dewey a kind of mystique that has allowed successive generations of philosophers and educators to argue, as Dewey himself did late in his career in *Experience and Education* (1938), that the misapplication of his educational philosophy is the consequence of a failure to grasp his ideas correctly. There is always, then, an opportunity for a revival of Dewey's thought, as yet one more scholar attempts to explain and accurately apply Dewey's *real* ideas. This is one reason why, despite withering attacks that might have consigned other thinkers to oblivion, Dewey is always able to rise again, Phoenix-like, as the hero of educational reform.²⁴ The irony is that educators often look to Dewey for solutions to problems that he himself created. Thus, a thorough airing and dissection of his thought is all the more imperative if we are to forestall the decline of American education before it has passed the point of recovery.

Some will undoubtedly protest that I have failed *to understand* Dewey, an objection that often serves as a talisman to ward off all criticism of his philosophy. Dewey, though, is not that difficult to understand if one is willing to accept the obvious—namely, that his arguments are ideologically charged and philosophically vague. Dewey subordinates his philosophy to his politics. I know this sounds harsh; but, it is true, and it is the key to unlocking the purported difficulties of his thought.

What Dewey was not able to accomplish through the cogency of his arguments, he tried to supply by the sheer volume of his writing: his oeuvre has often overwhelmed both academic and lay readers by its bulk alone. In this book, I refer to many of Dewey's works, but I have placed special emphasis on the four works in which he presents his educational thought most directly: *Democracy and Education* (1916), perhaps his best-known work and the book in which he attempts to summarize his "entire philosophical position";²⁵ *Hu-*

man Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology (1922), which Dewey described as a study of “social conduct,” but which is best characterized as a study of moral philosophy with important implications for moral education; *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915), which blends theory with a discussion of progressive educational practices; and *Experience and Education* (1938), an attempt to confront the many criticisms provoked by his life-long effort at educational reconstruction.

At the time of its publication, one reviewer thought *Democracy and Education* (1916) as important as Plato’s *Republic* and Rousseau’s *Emile*. It has since been translated into a number of languages, including Arabic, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Persian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish.²⁶ Its influence is difficult to overstate. William H. Kilpatrick “employed it as the bible of Columbia Teachers [College],” where he taught thousands of education majors.²⁷ It is tightly organized and succinctly argued, containing all of Dewey’s important concepts. Many of these concepts, however, are discussed only superficially. For that reason, *Democracy and Education* may be Dewey’s least objectionable work, since no subject is treated in great depth before another topic is introduced. Furthermore, all of these concepts are woven together in a philosophical system that appears at once coherent and plausible, so much so that it may seem difficult to identify a strategic point of criticism. Finally, Dewey’s linkage of educational reform and democratic progress is ingenious and bestows a kind of universal appeal and philosophical orthodoxy on this work. The title itself reflects Dewey’s grand theme that the future of American democracy is dependent on a revolution in American education, and that schools must therefore become the engines of democratic and social reform. *Democracy and Education*—or excerpts thereof—is the book most likely to be chosen in a school of education or department of political science as an introduction to Dewey’s thought.

Human Nature and Conduct contains Dewey's most comprehensive criticism of traditional character development. *Human Nature and Conduct* is, also, in many ways, Dewey's most revealing work. Since for Dewey "all morality is social," his inclusion of the word "social" in the subtitle of this work is significant, in that it reflects his opposition to any traditional notion of *individual* character: ethics for Dewey is exclusively a social matter, even though he finds it useful to retain much of the classical vocabulary of moral philosophy. *Human Nature and Conduct* began as a series of lectures Dewey offered in the spring of 1918, lectures delivered, in part, to suggest an alternative to the more individualistic theories of moral behavior popular in his day, including those suggested by Freudian psychoanalysis.²⁸ In this book he sought to articulate a psychology suitable for democratic practice, one that would provide the theoretical foundation for progressive democratic change in the post-World War I period. Dewey wished to demonstrate how the social dynamics between the members of a participatory democracy might take place, and how such dynamics could furnish the moral basis of a democratic society. One sympathetic reviewer proclaimed, rightly, that *Human Nature and Conduct* "dethrones all the idols of the moralists."²⁹ Alan Ryan notes, "The politics of works like *Human Nature and Conduct* never got in the way of their acceptance as texts, partly because Dewey's politics were so much part of his philosophy that readers had no sense that he was launching a political campaign."³⁰

Taken with *Democracy and Education*, *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915) elevated Dewey to the status of principal leader and spokesman for the progressive movement. (Dewey relied upon his disciple, W. H. Kilpatrick, to implement many of his ideas through Teachers College, Columbia University, where Kilpatrick taught for twenty-eight years.) Finally, late in his career, Dewey attempted a kind of apologetic, *Experience and Education* (1925), as an effort to confront the many criticisms provoked by his lifelong revolt against conventional education. The longer one reads *Experience and Edu-*

cation, however, the more disturbed one becomes at this intemperate and disingenuous volume in which Dewey does little more than reiterate his leading ideas as he once again castigates traditional educational notions as harshly as ever.

Other important Dewey works, while not directly about education, nonetheless provide elucidation for the ideas in his explicitly educational texts. If *Democracy and Education* is Dewey's major work in education, some argue that *Experience and Nature* (1925) is of equal importance as a general philosophical work. The book was an attempt to satisfy critics who complained that Dewey's ideas were obscure and difficult to follow. If Dewey can be said to have a theory of metaphysics, it is his faith in experience. This metaphysics, moreover, is described as "naturalism," although the explanation thereof in some ways better indicates what Dewey does not believe rather than what he does believe. If there is meaning in life, Dewey argues, it is to be found fully in the material world and our experience thereof. Belief in the supernatural or any other search for transcendence is futile. To the extent Dewey has a system to interpret this metaphysics, it is his reliance upon the scientific method. This means that the only real guidance available to human beings is the observation of experience and the ongoing attempt to find and verify hypotheses to explain it. Hence, he explains in his preface that this book is about "empirical naturalism" or "naturalistic empiricism"—the reader may take his pick. Dewey's "naturalistic method," moreover, is a "winnowing fan" by which the "chaff" of life may be sifted from the wheat, the latter defined as consisting only of that which is scientifically verifiable (EE, ix-x; 1a).

The Quest for Certainty (1929) is a work of skepticism, despite Dewey's insistence that it is not. It is the product of a series of lectures in Edinburgh in the spring of 1929, lectures that were, by all accounts, enthusiastically received. The book has two theses. In the first, Dewey criticizes all previous philosophical and religious dogma as vain attempts to secure assurance about life and morals when

such assurance is not possible. To allay his fears, for example, early man invented religion; later civilizations crafted philosophy for the same purpose. Secondly, recalling to mind the phrase associated with Kant, Dewey announces a kind of “Copernican revolution” or “Copernican reversal” whereby the scientific method becomes the sure guide to life.³¹ The *Quest for Certainty* is also one of Dewey’s books in which his attack on religion and tradition is especially salient.

The Public and Its Problems (1927) is the volume most concerned with political principles. In it Dewey explains that the failure of American democracy, as he perceives it, is found in the inadequacy of our understanding and experience of the “public.” The concept of the “public,” Dewey argues, should now replace that of the “individual,” which he explains has been the traditional basis of liberal democracy. The emergence of the “public” depends upon greater communication, which will in turn facilitate a meaningful inquiry into how attention to the “public” might foster a more humane democratic experience. In other words, the precise meaning of the public, like so many of Dewey’s ideas, awaits discovery through inquiry and experimentation; Dewey cannot at this time define it. *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) was motivated by social critic Walter Lippman’s arguments doubting the ability of a democratic citizenry to engage fully in self-government.³² Lyndon B. Johnson reportedly took the phrase “The Great Society” from this book to describe his ambitious social policy agenda.³³ Ironically, however, in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey argues that Americans must leave behind “The Great Society,” the product of modern industrialization, in favor of “The Great Community.” In that way, the “public” is recovered from the tangle of the impersonal machinery of contemporary life (PP, 126–27, 147, 157).

Dewey compiled *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920) from lectures delivered at Waseda University in Japan during his extended visit there and his subsequent visit to China. He later suggested that a more apt title might have been “Reconstruction of Philosophy”

because the thesis of his book is his wholesale rejection of existing philosophic and religious movements in favor of his conception of naturalism. Although everything Dewey wrote revolved around education, Dewey sought a comprehensive philosophy under which all his intellectual interests might be subsumed. Late in his career he tackled the subject of art in *Art as Experience* (1934), arguing that the merit of art is in the experience of the beholder, not in its intrinsic genius or beauty. Dewey also sought, in the seventh chapter of *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and more fully in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), to redefine logic as mostly a quest guided by observation and hypothesis, thus demonstrating how wedded he was to the scientific method in every intellectual undertaking conceivable.

Jay Martin offers a tragicomic account of Dewey's endeavor, while in his nineties, to write a comprehensive text on philosophy. The anticipated title was *Naturalism* and Dewey expected it could be the summation of his life's work. But he lost the only copy of the manuscript in New York on a return to his Fifth Avenue apartment after a trip away: "My heavens, my brief case isn't here."³⁴

After this introductory chapter, chapters 2 and 3 are a summary of the principal features of Dewey's educational thought. Chapter 4 is a kind of excursus in which I compare the educational thought of John Dewey with that of Thomas Jefferson, in particular, and, the American founding generation, in general. Dewey claimed to be the heir of Jefferson's democratic ideals, which Dewey hoped to promote through his own education philosophy. This, however, is a misleading if not disingenuous boast on Dewey's part, as this chapter demonstrates. Chapter 5, "A Useful Education," leaves a discussion of Dewey aside so as to draw upon other prominent educational philosophers to consider what makes for a truly profitable education, and whether a "useful" education must be opposed to tradition. Finally, chapter 6 offers concrete steps for overcoming the Dewey legacy.

Some will protest that any serious work on Dewey must take into account the vast amount of secondary literature in which several generations of academics have made their careers writing about Dewey—but more often writing about what the last person has written about Dewey. At some point, such activity reaches a point of diminishing return. With respect to Dewey, that point was undoubtedly passed decades ago. The French eighteenth-century essayist Montaigne anticipated the modern academic mimesis in which writers trade views on various subjects, and then trade views on their respective views until the original subject is all but forgotten, and perhaps badly understood. As Montaigne noted of the state of “serious” writing in his own day, “It is more of a business to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the texts.” Montaigne likens such “scholarship” to the activity of Aesop’s hungry dogs. The canines saw a corpse floating at a distance at sea but it was too far to retrieve by swimming. So, they set about “lapping up the water so as to dry out a path to it, and suffocated themselves.”³⁵ With Montaigne’s admonition in mind, I have tried not to write yet one more interpretation of Dewey’s work. Such books comprise a vast body of water. This book, for the most part, is a simple exegesis of Dewey’s writing, with commentary suggesting how his thought finds expression in contemporary American education. To adhere to that plan, the reader will find that I have quoted Dewey liberally so as best to illuminate his thought. “Give a man enough rope and he will hang himself,” the proverb suggests.

Like the prodigal son, the educational establishment in this country has wandered from its inheritance. This inheritance comes from ancient Greece through the Judeo-Christian tradition and the best of Enlightenment thought, especially the ideas of the nation’s founders. Perhaps the most significant development in our apostasy is the departure from common sense in favor of grand schemes of classroom experimentation. Consequently, too many students feed on the husks of pigs, a sorry meal that often leaves them intellectually, morally, and spiritually famished.