

ON RE-READING JOHN DEWEY

Bernard Murchland

exasperation. The despair is most keenly felt by those who have been identified with Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence . . . who declare themselves to be fighting with their backs to the wall, barely holding their own. . . . [We must] recognize the dilemma in which the Soviet Union finds itself and the impossibility for the Soviet Union to remain indefinitely a passive bystander in the face of the progressive destruction of North Vietnam by American military power." He concludes by warning: "However anxious the Soviet Union is to avoid a direct military confrontation with the United States, it is not willing to buy the avoidance with its abdication as leader and protector of its Communist allies."

This is a pretty clear statement of the alarmist view I attributed to him: So much then for the "inexorable" pressures on the Soviet Union *four* years ago to enter the war. (Since then the United States has dropped, we are told, more bombs on North Vietnam than on Germany in World War II and committed well over a half million troops, without triggering a Soviet intervention.)

What of my reference to a nuclear exchange? Apart from the obvious fact that any military clash between nuclear powers runs the risk of escalation to nuclear war, Prof. Morgenthau himself makes the argument: "In the present conflict China is in no position to come to the aid of North Vietnam without risking destruction of its atomic and major industrial installations; for it is not yet a nuclear power. But the Soviet Union is under the cover of its nuclear forces. It could go a long way, albeit facing the risk of escalation, to demonstrate to the Communist world that China only speaks loudly. . . . If worse should come to worse and North Vietnam were to be involved actively in the conflict, they would have to rely for their protection upon the nuclear power and the conventional arms of the Soviet Union."

So far as I am concerned this clinches the matter. Prof. Morgenthau *did* say these things—and if *he* has said them, how much more fevered have been the imaginations of lesser men, both those who make our policy and those who oppose it.

The war in Vietnam is a great folly. Indeed, as I shall report in these pages, having made an extensive tour of Vietnam recently on the fighting fronts and having talked to politicians in the South, I have returned in a kind of despair. But it is not only Vietnam that is at fault in American foreign policy. We are both beset by real demons and the fictive demons of our imaginations.

There is no way out of America's present dilemmas unless we learn to distinguish the real from the unreal.

Edmund Stillman

I profited by a recent period of unexpected leisure to re-read some of John Dewey's works. The experience reinforced my conviction that he is the most significant philosopher America has produced. Dewey plied the philosophical art on a broad front. He had something to say on everything from educational theory to logic and metaphysics. He rarely failed to be original and stimulating even though he wasn't always right. Dewey's weaknesses and incompleteness have been thoroughly expounded by his critics. But it seems to me that we could greatly benefit today by re-emphasizing some of his strengths. In what follows I would like to comment on some of these.

First among them, I suggest, is Dewey's wholist approach. All his life he fought the narrowness, the disrupting dualisms and disintegrative individualism that characterizes so much traditional and contemporary thinking. It may fairly be said that the dominant theme of his writings was the continuous and interdependent quality of all aspects of life. When he was a young man he was much impressed by the concept of organism he found in the works of Thomas Huxley. He wrote then of his desire for a world and a life that would have the same properties as had the human organism in Huxley's thought. Hegel and Darwin were to be two of the influences that helped the young Dewey develop his theory of "organic coordination." The category that emerged as basic, and towards the clarification of which Dewey directed his intellectual energy, was that of human experience, *all* human experience. As William Levi has commented, philosophy for Dewey became a means of "widening the human horizon by a vivid illumination of the various forms of human experience." The fresh challenge to serious thought in our time, Dewey remained convinced, was to inseminate all modes of experience with intelligent direction. In this way, he hoped, the grievous alienation that afflicts the experience of twentieth-century man could be overcome.

Dewey's principal area of concentration was the dichotomy between science and human affairs. As he put it in *The Quest for Certainty* (and repeated many times over): "The problem of restoring integra-

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tion and cooperation between man's beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life." Philosophy is at its healthiest when performing an ethical function. Since at least the time of Descartes we have been living with what Whitehead termed a bifurcated view of nature according to which the truths of science and the propositions of ethics have no common ground. In his autobiographical essay *From Absolutism to Experimentalism* Dewey records his distress over this dilemma, over the dualism between "something called 'science' on the one hand and something called 'morals' on the other." Today the dominant schools of ethical thought still hold that moral judgments are not factual in the way scientific statements are, that such judgments are incapable of empirical verification.

Dewey strove mightily against this view. His principal counter-attack was to situate all forms of experience—feeling and willing as well as thinking—within nature. Thus our needs and desires are as indicative of what is "natural" as are the discoveries of science. The former are not alien to the existential world. This insight is the cornerstone of Dewey's humanistic naturalism. It enabled him to bring into rational focus the so-called "subjective" values of aesthetics, religion and ethics and give them honorable partnership with the presumed "objective" values of science. Inwardness and outwardness and all the other dualisms that plague traditional thought were now reconciled in a harmonious thrust towards unification. When the consciousness of science is fully impregnated with the consciousness of human value, Dewey wrote in a typical summary statement, "the greatest dualism which now weighs humanity down, the split between the material, the mechanical, the scientific and the moral and ideal will be destroyed."

All the strands of Dewey's thinking converge towards a central preoccupation with social theory. The philosophy of social reconstruction was his chief interest, one that both vindicated the superstructure of his instrumentalism and revealed his profound grasp of the crisis of liberalism. He saw democracy as more than a form of government; it is above all "a mode of associated life, of conjoint communicated experience." Society must be directed by ideas and knowledge if it is to cohere and perform the moral task of liberating human potential. Dewey took it for granted that society and individuals are correlative and organic to one another, "society requiring the service and subordination of individuals and at the same time existing to serve them." But this assumption, while true, suffers from generality. "Society" and "individual" are abstract terms when what is needed

is enlightenment on specific modalities and relationships. Fruitful discussion in this domain must bear on concrete situations rather than on general concepts.

In *Reconstruction in Philosophy* Dewey said: "The region of concrete difficulties, where the assistance of intelligent method for tentative plans for experimentation is urgently needed, is precisely where intelligence fails to operate." To dissolve particular problems by means of inapplicable generalities is to take the high road to political obscurantism. Society is, most basically, association, joint intercourse for the purpose of maximizing experience. But the point here is that there are many kinds of association, many kinds of goods. Experience is always plural. The specificity of each type must be located before effective action or profitable discourse can be undertaken. Classical liberalism viewed the individual as the repository of its prized values—rationality, freedom, and so forth—and was inclined to define both the individual and the state in static, ready-made terms. Today individuals—and restricted groupings of individuals—find that their interests and concerns are conditioned by large, impersonal organizations and consequently the possibility of community as well as ethical fulfillment are seriously compromised. The campus crisis is an excellent example from the contemporary scene.

The advent of technology has made the reconstruction of liberalism mandatory. We must now find new ways for the citizenry to express its interests as well as to sensitize public officials to these needs. Dewey insisted at great length upon communication and public debate as the instruments of realizing society as a process of association, as a community. In *The Public and Its Problems* he urged a responsible art of communication to animate the physical tools of the mass media. "When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not its despotic master. Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion." There is nostalgia in these lines, perhaps a note of overstrained aspiration. For as yet we have no guarantee that the kind of political and moral life Dewey called for is possible in an age such as ours. Some of our more eloquent social commentators doubt it. Yet our awareness of the need for drastic social change could not be keener. The young, among others, have not given up hope on the chances of participatory democracy. It occurs to me that many of Dewey's insights are relevant to our quest today and that we might with profit develop them in the context of the new challenges that face us.

They aren't, after all, so very different from those Dewey himself contended with.