# COMMUNICATIONS

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## Professor Bhattacharya's Demythologizing of John Dewey

In Professor N.C. Bhattacharya's "Demythologizing John Dewey" (this *Journal,* Dec., 1974), some of the problems which persistently attend the understanding and interpretation of Dewey's philosophy are painfully evident, as well as various errors in judgement and fact, both of which prompt the following comments.

It has always puzzled me why critics of Dewey are not satisfied with debunking his ideas, but are inclined to deny him philosophic stature as well. Professor Bhattacharya, in this regard, is more generous than some, referring to Dewey merely as a "poor philosopher" — whereas the usual jibe is to deny he was a philosopher at all, but only a social reformer. To support his claim, Professor Bhattacharya mentions that Dewey lacks the "intellectual depth" of Peirce and the "systematic rationality" of C.I. Lewis, and refers to Passmore's remark about the mysteriousness of Dewey's reputation to British philosophers and the fact that Ayer's book on pragmatism mentions Dewey only three times (in the Introduction). Why Dewey should be set off from Peirce so sharply is odd for while Peirce's great originality and insight are undeniable, Peirce and Dewey share a theory of inquiry that epistemologically at least, is quite similar — and inquiry is one of Dewey's notions (Professor Bhattacharya finds wanting. Nor is it clear why Lewis and British philosophers qualify as competent judges of Dewey. Lewis, despite his nominal conceptual pragmatism, is much closer to the mainstream of British empiricism, while the trouble the British have had with Dewey is notorious, and I suppose it has never once occurred to them — and to Professor Bhattacharya in this case — that it might be their shortcoming and not Dewey's. Personally, I am in basic disagreement with the fundamentals of the British empirical tradition and the analytic-linguistic philosophy that has grown out of it. But I would never dream of calling Bertrand Russell anything but a very great philosopher. Imagine, though, the furor that would ensue were an American pragmatist (or *any* philosopher) to write a book on the origins of British empiricism in which Russell's name appeared only three times (in the Introduction)! Yet it is Ayer's incredible counterpart to this which Bhattacharya holds up as a model of the good philosopher by which to judge John Dewey! Surely it is appropriate here to mention at least one work to offset the slant of these model philosophers — namely, H.S. Thayer's *Meaning and Action,* which includes, by the way, a thorough treatment of C.I. Lewis.

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In his treatment of Dewey's theory of inquiry, Professor Bhattacharya centres his attention on what he calls "the myth of the given." For Dewey, he observes, what is experientially given is never directly known, but is subject to a transformation in which it becomes known through operations of inquiry. But this strikes Bhattacharya as 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." But what is so "strange" and "unintelligible" about it? The rejection of the doctrine of immediate knowledge dates back to Plato, who argued that knowing is more than a passive reception of external objects and involves a contribution on the part of the subject. In modern philosophy, Kant provided the classic formulation of "the myth of the given" in his transcendental doctrine that knowledge is a product of an interpretation of the sensuous given. Add to this Dewey's and other pragmatists' numerous and lengthy accounts of this "strange" notion, and one can only feel that what is strange is Bhattacharya's inability to understand it. Bhattacharya, like so many Anglo-American philosophers, seems bent on forcing Dewey's inquiry onto a Procrustean bed of non-process, non-situational traditional empiricism. Thus he objects to the consequential position truth occupies in inquiry, and remarks: "The object of knowledge is not finding out the truth about matters that matter." I take it this is a way of saying that an adequate theory of truth ought to provide a direct rendering of antecedent subject matter. If it doesn't, it is not only false but unintelligible. This is characteristic of the British philosopher's incredulity over Dewey, and seems to involve an attitude of: "It's not like our theory, so we don't understand it." Dewey's theory of inquiry may indeed prove to be inadequate, but it is neither strange nor unintelligible. And its adequacy should certainly be judged by those capable of understanding it.

One more point, Professor Bhattacharya was so intent on disloding "the myth of the given" from Dewey, that he failed to note it is a "myth" fully subscribed to by two of his model philosophers, Peirce and Lewis.

When it comes to Dewey's ethics, Professor Bhattacharya finds it puzzling that other pragmatists should have produced "significantly different interpretations" of Dewey's position. But I can't for the life of me see why this is puzzling. Rather a sign of health and vitality, it could only be puzzling if one viewed pragmatism as an iron-clad creed requiring strict adherence to its tenets.

In two passages cited from *The Quest for Certainty,* Professor Bhattacharya attempts to demonstrate that Dewey was guilty of recommending that moral inuqiry be directed at two quite different objects, acts of liking and experienced objects. "What does Dewey want us to inquire into?" he asks. "In one passage he speaks of inquiry 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 where is the confusion here? The conditions and consequences of experienced objects are those conditions which are responsible for our likings and desires and these conditions are the proper object of value judgment. There is but one object of value judgment, not two, as Bhattacharya mistakenly assumes. Indeed, Dewey makes this unmistakably clear in the first passage cited: "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."

Professor Bhattacharya raises an appropriate question about the status of the criteria to be employed in evaluating the desirability of consequences in moral inquiry

and wonders if such evaluation can be effected "unless we are willing to admit some basic principles or ideals, some conception of the good?" Dewey did not reject fixed ideals, but the alternative to fixed ideals is not no ideals, no conception of the good. As should be plain from even a cursory reading of Dewey, he advocated ends-in-view — provisional, tentative ends, goals and values, which grow out of and are regulative of means in inquiry, constantly being tested and revised in terms of their consequences. The satisfactoriness of ends-in-view is determined by rigorous conditions of inquiry (by the requirements of the *situation,* which includes more than the subjective desires of the inquirer), not by the absurd notion of "what works" which Bhattacharya banally perpetuates.

In another part of his article, Professor Bhattacharya is concerned to show that, in one way or another, Dewey left much to be desired in his scholarly treatment of his predecessors. For one thing, Bhattacharya seems bothered that Dewey was so critical of so many of them, referring to his "outbursts" against Plato and Aristotle. Frankly, I had never thought strong criticism a particular philosophic vice. But then critics of Dewey are fond of calling to our attention faults in Dewey which in others go unnoticed. Frequently Dewey is cited as having had no sense of history, a superficial knowledge of the history of philosophy, no knowledge of science, and so on. Bhattacharya adds to these the observation that in his treatment of Greek thinkers, "Dewey hardly paid any attention to textual details in their works or to the problems of translation and interpretation." More than this, he thinks Dewey totally misunderstood Aristotle and cites Randall's Schilpp article to back him up. Randall "admitted," says Bhattacharya, "that the total impression he (Dewey) gives of Aristotelian thought is nevertheless false." Apparently at this point, though, Professor Bhattacharya's excitement in having found what he thought was the support of a renowned scholar got the better of him, for he carelessly failed to note the first part of Randall's sentence, which reads: "It would scarcely be proper and pertinent, even if true, to maintain here . . . " This, I suggest, when added to the remainder quoted by Bhattacharya, conveys a quite different meaning than the remainder taken alone. It seems to me that Dewey's understanding of Aristotle, of all people, was second to none, as his long critical appreciation in the *Logic* amply attests.

To Professor Bhattacharya's criticism that Dewey failed to do justice to Kant, one may reply that Dewey did, though one has to look beyond the one book Bhattacharya cites—*German Philosophy and Politics*—to find it. And to the charge that Dewey's treatment of Marx was superficial, one might rather draw just the opposite conclusion. Dewey was keenly aware of both the similarities and differences between his theory and Marx; and precisely because he recognized the *differences,* he strove to point them out and promote what he felt to be a superior theory of social change.

Professor Bhattacharya's attempt to tarnish the "myth" of Dewey's reputation as radical liberal, philosopher of freedom and democracy, is pursued by ignoring the enormous contributions Dewey made to social issues and focusing on one or two incidents and issues from which unwarranted and irresponsible conclusions are drawn. The first is the Dewey-as-spy incident. As Bhattacharya reports it: " . . . 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." Bhattacharya's sole evidence for this gruesome sounding tale is the listing of the report in Thomas' Dewey *Bibliography*—which he incorrectly cites in a way that implies the report is contained in the *Bibliography* in full. The listing does include, however, a brief selection from the Introduction to the report written by Dewey. From that we learn that Dewey and a group of Columbia graduate students, including soon-to-be-distinguished American philosophers Brand

Blanshard and Irwin Edman, were asked by Albert Barnes to conduct a sociological-cultural study of a group of Polish immigrants in Philadelphia for the purpose of better understanding forces alien to democratic internationalism. Dewey *was* asked to and did submit a confidential report of his study to Military Intelligence in Washington in the summer of 1918. This much information was available to Bhattacharya. That it hardly warrants the conclusion that Dewey "worked secretly" for Military Intelligence seems clear. For "worked secretly" is ambiguous and implies that Dewey was in the hire of the government, which he was not. Nor do we know that the immigrants were "citizens". In fact there is so much we do not know about this incident that about the most we could assert is the possibility that it was an instance of poor judgment on Dewey's part. But to establish even that much would require far more extensive historical investigation into the circumstances surrounding the incident than Bhattacharya bothered to engage in. I should think some factors to be considered were that the country was still at war and Poland had been under German occupation throughout. Nor can we assume that U.S. Military Intelligence in W.W. I was of similar character as today's CIA, nor that W.W. I was like Vietnam, and so on. And of course reading the report itself would be necessary. It is inevitable that we judge the past by the present, but the danger in doing so is assuming current perspectives and criteria are the only right ones and are sufficient for accounting for past events. The mildest criticism one can direct at Professor Bhattacharya in this matter is that he jumped to conclusions.

Professor Bhattacharya's parting shot at Dewey is the charge that he never spoke out directly on racial problems in America. This is in part true. So far as I am aware Dewey wrote no articles directly on the subject — though there may have been letters, speeches, etc. Of course Dewey frequently referred to racial equality in his general writings on democracy, as in the following passage from "Creative Democracy — The Task Before Us": "Belief in the Common Man . . . 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, colour, sex, birth, and family, or material or cultural wealth." But I take it this would not satisfy Professor Bhattacharya. We might hope, though, that it would alter just a little his insinuation in his next to last sentence that Dewey was a coward when it came to expressing himself publicly on the racial problem.

These excursions into the shortcomings of Dewey the man and his involvement in social problems take us away, it seems to me, from the proper job of philosophical criticism—*viz.*, the critical appraisal of theory. What if Dewey had said as little as, say, C.I. Lewis, about social problems, and in his personal life and political beliefs had exhibited thought and behaviour of a bizarre form. Would this have been a blot on his pragmatism, would it have meant his philosophical theory were any less true? I think not. Peirce did not distinguish himself by his contributions to social controversy, and this seems not to have affected the admiration philosophers—including Professor Bhattacharya — had had for his philosophy. A philosopher's theory does not stand or fall by the degree his practice embodies it. But if he can carry it into his life, so much the better. Dewey and Russell were the two giants of our time fortunate and capable enough of doing this. The question of their personal effectiveness and consistency is one thing the truth of their philosophy another.

For these reasons I find at least the latter part of Professor Bhattacharya's article an exercise infutility. As regards the rest, I understand and share his frustration with the outlandish distortions of Dewey's central concepts in the social studies and other behavioural science-oriented fields of education today. But rather than

flailing away at Dewey in the manner he has, would it not be more productive to critically analyse these distortions in the literature and practice where they occur? If then the discussion should lead back to Dewey — as it undoubtedly would — criticism would have a basis in current problems and would serve to more fruitfully illuminate, amend if need be demythologize both Dewey and today's educators.