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On John Dewey: A Rejoinder

I am thankful to the editor of *The Journal of Educational Thought* for giving me this opportunity to add a rejoinder to Professor Thomas B. Colwell's criticism of my paper on "Demythologizing John Dewey" (this *Journal,* vol. 8, No. 3). There were several points in my original paper which Professor Colwell did not question or discuss, and I do not wish to say anything about them in my reply. I also wish to be brief.

I

Professor Colwell wonders why some people (not me though) deny that "he (Dewey) was a philosopher at all, but only a social reformer."[1] The point is not difficult to understand. It is not only that philosophy is, according to Dewey, always harnessed to a social programme, but a 'genuine' philosopher in that Deweyan 'complete act of reflective thinking' seems bound to find himself in the role of a reformer. Social reform and philosophy are at least tautologically identified; both in their true import are being explained to mean "the liberation and expansion of meanings of which experience is capable."[2] Dewey maintained that the "true impact of philosophical reconstruction" lies "with reconstruction of special situations rather than in any refinements in the general concepts . . ."[3] He also wrote in the *Essays in Honor of William James:* "Better it is for philosophy to err in active participation in the living struggles and issues of its own age and time than to maintain an immune, monastic impeccability" (p.77). The 37-page new "Introduction" to the 1948 enlarged edition of the *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (originally lectured at the Imperial University of Japan in Tokyo in 1919) was an attempt to present in a philosophical way his favourite position that "the separation once set up between theory and practice no longer exists."[4] Thus, Professor Colwell's observation that "A philosopher's theory does not stand or fall by the degree his practice embodies it" does not seem to well represent the spirit of John Dewey.

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[1]See, B. Blanshard, "Can the Philosopher Influence Social Change?", *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. LI, No. 24, pp. 741-753.

[2]John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1929), p. 411.

[3]John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston, The Beacon Press, Enlarged edition, 1948), p. 193.

[4]*Ibid,* p. xli.

I also wish to mention another point in the passing. Professor Colwell seems to be a great admirer of Bertrand Russell (though he is in basic disagreement with Russell's philosophy!), and says towards the end of his paper that "Dewey and Russell were the two giants of our time fortunate and capable enough" to carry their philosophies in their lives. Where did he get this about Russell? Russell had said very clearly that "between my views on social questions and my views on logic and epistemology . . . there is no logical connection."[5] The "passionate sceptic" in philosophy was not in the least sceptical about his non-philosophical views and pursuits.

II

Of my brief treatment of Dewey's theory of inquiry Professor Colwell sees only my "inability to understand it." While he seems to be willing to admit that "Dewey's theory of inquiry may indeed prove to be adequate," he recommends that "its adequacy should certainly be judged by those capable of understanding it." I really do not know how one can go about answering this. Was Russell capable of understanding Dewey's "new logic"? What I said in my paper was that Dewey's theory of inquiry "remains in part unintelligible." Many other American philosophers[6] have said the same thing in different ways, and Professor Colwell has not been able to shed any new light to make matters more intelligible. Incidentally, again, Peirce and Lewis are certainly not my "model philosophers", I only suggested that in many respects their versions of pragmatism were more consistent than Dewey's.

In my original paper I mentioned that a large group of distinguished American philosophers (not just "other pragmatists" as Professor Colwell writes) have produced significantly different interpretations of Dewey's reconstruction of moral philosophy. Professor Colwell does not find this "puzzling"; he believes this to be "a sign of health and vitality." This makes one wonder what Professor Colwell considers to be a sound moral theory — something like a nose of wax that one can mould without any "strict adherence to its tenets"!

Professor Colwell does not find any difficulty in reconciling Dewey's talk about inquiring into an *act of liking* and *an experienced object* or what Morton White described as "the consequences of our desiring to smoke opium" and "the consequences of smoking it."[7] In his view Dewey makes his position unmistakably clear in the statement:

> 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.[8]

But Dewey nowhere tells us how we can pass from one side of the semicolon to the other. Inquiry may tell us the conditions and results of an experienced object, but how does this knowledge alone produce the conviction that we *should* or *should not* regulate our desires, affections and enjoyments in one way or the other?

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[5]P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (Chicago, North-western University, 1944), p. 727, also p. 729.

[6]See, for example, Morris R. Cohen, "Some Difficulties in John Dewey's Anthropocentric Naturalism" in *Studies in Philosophy and Science* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1949), p. 139 & p. 149; H.S. Thayer, *The Logic of Pragmatism* (New York: Humanities Press, 1952; Israel Scheffler, "Educational Liberalism and Dewey's Philosophy," *Harvard Educational Review,* Vol. XXVI, No. 2 (1956), pp. 190-198; D.S. MacKay, "What Does Mr. Dewey mean by an 'Indeterminate Situation'," *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. XXXIV, (1942), pp. 141-148.

[7]See Morton White, *Social Thought in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 217.

[8]John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), p. 265.

Where does this *should* come from?[9] It is strange that Professor Colwell quotes a passage to make Dewey's position "unmistakably clear" whose ambiguity has long been known to students of philosophy.

III

Professor Colwell took exception to my short quote from J.H. Randall's observation in the Schilpp volume that the "total impression" Dewey "gives of Aristotelian thought is nevertheless false." He accuses me of carelessly failing to quote the first part of Randall's sentence, which in Professor Colwell's view would have conveyed "a quite different meaning than the remainder taken alone." I wish to quote the whole relevant passage, and leave it to the reader to decide whether the first part of the sentence and the following sentences make any difference in what I believe Randall said about Dewey's treatment of Aristotle. Randall wrote:

> But however effective in developing his own position, most of what he (Dewey) has explicitly said about Aristotle has conveyed little real historical illumination: it has been far more relevant to Saint Thomas than to the Greek. Much of what he points to is there: much is not, and is to be found only in the scholastic tradition. It would scarcely be proper and pertinent, even if true, to maintain here that the total impression he gives of Aristotelian thought is nevertheless false. It would be more to the point to ask, why should Dewey view Aristotle through the eyes of Neo-thomists? Why should he not see Aristotle for what he is, the greatest functionalist in the philosophical tradition?[10]

If Dewey's understanding of Aristotle, as Professor Colwell claims, "was second to none," the passage quoted above does not support this contention. And I do not wish to go into the other "serious studies of Greek thought" — and of Aristotle in particular — as it is obvious that Professor Colwell has no interest in them.

Of my criticism of Dewey's treatment of Kant, Professor Colwell has very little to say. He says that one must "look beyond the one book Bhattacharya cites," but does not mention any other work from Dewey's enormous writing. And even if Dewey had in fact said something different about German philosophy in general and about Kant in particular in some of his other works, this does not make his *German Philosophy and Politics* (1915 and 1942) irrelevant. And to my observation that Dewey's treatment of Marx was superficial, Professor Colwell states superficially that "one might draw just the opposite conclusion." However, he does not explain how we can draw the opposite conclusion, nor does he tell us why we should believe that Dewey (except that he "felt") had a "superior theory of social change."

IV

While Professor Colwell is silent about Dewey's confidential report on the "radical elements" in China to the Military Attaché in the American Legation in Peking, he takes great pains to show that my reference to Dewey's secret work among a group of Polish immigrants in Philadelphia was only an attempt to draw "unwarranted and irresponsible conclusions" to tarnish the image of a liberal philosopher. He talks about the fact that the country was at war, and that the U.S. Military Intelligence during the First World War was not "of similar character as today's C.I.A." Now, I am aware of all this, and the only comment I made was that "these must appear in retrospect as strange deeds on the part of a liberal educator who in his public utterances was urging for free flow of information, public parti-

[9] For a detailed discussion of this and related matters see my "Inquiry, Values, and Growth: A Re-Assessment of Dewey's Theory of Valuation," *Educational Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter, 1975), pp. 92-101.

[10] P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University, 1939), p. 102.

cipation, open discussions, etc. . ." I know more about this Philadelphia project than Professor Colwell thinks (several publications on this subject have been reported in a recent issue of *The Dewey Newsletter*), and if he is willing to judge the whole episode dispassionately and in the light of what Dewey urged to be the business of philosophical liberalism, he would not certainly speculate that this was "possibly an instance of poor judgment on Dewey's part" and at the same time to criticize me for "jumping to conclusions." The only conclusion I drew was to question why this did not appear as a "strange deed" to Dewey himself and to some of his liberal followers.

Professor Colwell agrees that my charge that Dewey never addressed himself directly to the racial problems in American society or on the question of racial segragation in the nation's schools "is in part true." He is not aware of any of Dewey's "articles directly on the subject," but hopes that "there may have been letters, speeches, etc." There is nothing on this subject in the Center for Dewey Studies either. However, I should note that Dewey attended the first — and his last — National Negro Conference in 1909, and gave "an extempore and ambiguous" speech on heredity and race. However, Professor Colwell is right that he frequently "referred to racial equality in his general writings on democracy," but one must also remember that Dewey urged that the business of the philosophers had always been to clarify men's minds on the pressing and specific problems of their own times. If he could write about eight hundred and fifty papers on many subjects under the sun, why did he overlook this one?