

John Dewey

1859-1952

by Pam Ecker

John Dewey, a major figure in American intellectual history, is considered to be one of the few Americans of the twentieth century who ". . . can be acknowledged on a world scale as a spokesman for mankind" (Dykhuizen, 1973, p. xv).

Dewey's areas of work included philosophy, psychology, education, politics, and social thought. At an event in celebration of his 90th birthday, in 1949, Dewey described his life goal as the quest to obtain "a moderately clear and distinct idea of what the problems are that underlie the difficulties and evils which we experience in fact; that is to say, in practical life." This concern with the practical, socially responsible life is a key element of the philosophical concept of pragmatism, which Dewey explicated in many of his writings. Dewey is also considered to be a preeminent voice in American educational philosophy, with emphasis on what is generally called "progressive education."

Dewey was just beginning his work in the 1890s, but his lifetime of intellectual accomplishments (40 books and over 700 articles, in addition to countless letters, lectures, and other published works) continue to play an influential role in many fields of knowledge.

The Center for Dewey Studies at the University of Southern Illinois is dedicated to promoting ongoing study of the significance of Dewey's work. The Center's Web site includes a sound clip of John Dewey speaking.

Quotations from Dewey's work and other Dewey resources also are available on the Web.

A Brief Dewey Biography

John Dewey was born October 20, 1859, in Burlington, Vermont. His father, Archibald, left the family tradition of farming, which had been followed for three generations, to become a grocer in the small city of Burlington. Dewey's mother, Lucina, also came from a farm family. Archibald sold the grocery business when he volunteered to join the Union Army in the Civil War, but after the war he became owner of a cigar and tobacco shop.

John and his two brothers grew up in a middle-class household in a community that included "old Americans" as well as new immigrants from Ireland and French Quebec. Lucina Dewey carried out philanthropic work with poor families living in the industrial section of Burlington. At his mother's request, Dewey joined the First Congregational Church at age eleven, although he later sought a more liberal religious perspective than was evident in his mother's conservative church.

Dewey completed his grade-school work in Burlington's public schools at age 12. He selected the college-preparatory track in high school, starting in 1872 (this option became available only a few

years previously) and completed his high school courses in three years. He began attending the University of Vermont, in Burlington, in 1875, when he was 16 years old. The classical curriculum was similar to Dewey's high school courses, emphasizing Greek and Latin, English literature, math, and rhetoric; however, the faculty "encouraged their students to be themselves and to think their own thoughts" (Dykhuizen, p. 10) and by his senior year, Dewey was immersed in studies of political, social, and moral philosophy.

Dewey graduated from the University of Vermont in 1879. Through a relative, he obtained a high school teaching position in Oil City, Pennsylvania, where he was part of a three-member faculty for two years. Dewey returned to Vermont in 1881, where he combined high school teaching with continuing study of philosophy, under the tutoring of Dewey's former undergraduate professor, Henry A. P. Torrey.

In September 1882, Dewey entered Johns Hopkins University to begin graduate studies in philosophy. Johns Hopkins was one of the first American universities to offer graduate instruction that was considered comparable to the European universities, with emphasis on original scholarly research as an expectation for graduate students as well as faculty members. Dewey was cautioned by several advisors, including the president of Johns Hopkins, Daniel C. Gilman, that he would be unlikely to obtain a university teaching position in philosophy without advanced training in Christian theology. Nevertheless, Dewey continued to study philosophy, as well as history and political science as minors.

Dewey's professors included Charles Sanders Peirce (logic), G. Stanley Hall (psychology), and George Sylvester Morris, whose interest in the work of Hegel and Kant greatly influenced Dewey. Dewey's dissertation, "The Psychology of Kant," was completed in 1884. The manuscript was never published and has never been found; however, an article by Dewey titled "Kant and Philosophic Method," published in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in April 1884 is believed to cover some of the same material as the dissertation.

Dewey's academic mentor, Morris, also taught at the University of Michigan, and Morris recommended Dewey for a junior faculty position at Michigan. After the completion of his Ph.D., Dewey received an appointment as an instructor of philosophy at Michigan, where he began teaching in September 1884. With Morris as department head, the Michigan philosophy department moved from the prevailing approach in American academic study of philosophy, which combined classical philosophy with Christian theology and was rarely critical of theological presuppositions. Instead, the Michigan philosophy department emphasized studies of British and German philosophy, particularly neo-Hegelian German idealism.

Dewey, like others in the department, taught a variety of courses and wrote a number of articles. Two articles published in the journal *Mind* in 1886 brought Dewey to the attention of the scholarly community. In these articles Dewey attempted to bring together views of philosophy and psychology; he argued that philosophy did not need a special methodology, since it is an expanded or more comprehensive psychology.

At Michigan, Dewey also was involved in founding and supporting a number of student organizations, including the Philosophical Society, the Students' Christian Association, and the Michigan Schoolmasters' Club, which studied the issues and connections between public secondary schools and universities. At the time Dewey helped found this organization (1886), the University's policy of "open admission" to all Michigan high school graduates with diplomas from "approved" high schools had been in operation for only 15 years.

Dewey's first book, *Psychology*, was published in 1887. In it, he explained a single philosophical system that was based on connections between the scientific study of psychology and German idealist philosophy. The book was well-received by some scholars and was adopted as a textbook at several universities, but it was criticized by Dewey's former professor of psychology, G. Stanley Hall, and by Hall's mentor, the philosopher William James.

Dewey's growing reputation as a scholar and teacher led to an offer to join the faculty at the University of Minnesota. Dewey accepted the position of Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy in 1888. He remained at Minnesota for only one year, and then returned to Michigan in 1889 to serve as Chair of the Department of Philosophy, after the sudden death of his mentor, George Morris. Dewey continued to teach, write, and be involved in campus and community issues. As one biographer notes, the early 1890s was the time when "democracy in all its phases-- political, economic, social, cultural-- came to claim Dewey's strongest allegiance and to command his deepest loyalties; interest in social aid and social reform groups began to replace his interest in the Church" (Dykhuizen, p. 73).

Dewey remained at Michigan until 1894, when he was recruited by William Rainey Harper to join the faculty at the four-year-old University of Chicago. Like Johns Hopkins, the University of Chicago was founded explicitly to stress graduate research and scholarship, with faculty members expected to publish outstanding scholarly work as well as demonstrate excellence in teaching. With Harper's encouragement, Dewey added several faculty members to the Philosophy Department, including former Michigan colleagues James H. Tufts, George Herbert Mead, and James R. Angell.

Dewey's department was intended to bring together philosophy, psychology, and the study of pedagogy, focusing on relationships between elementary and secondary school teachers and university educators. Dewey argued that pedagogy should be a separate department which would train its students to be specialists in education. Harper endorsed Dewey's proposal, and appointed Dewey to head the new pedagogy department as well as the philosophy department.

In the late 1890's, Dewey's writings began to reflect his break from his neo-Hegelian idealist view and his movement toward a new philosophical stance, which would later be recognized as pragmatism. Also at this time, Dewey expended much energy in developing the curriculum of the Department of Pedagogy. By 1900, 23 different education courses were available at Chicago. In 1896, the department's experimental school, called the University Elementary School, opened. By the early 1900s, Chicago's program (now called the Department of Education) was considered "the most rounded and comprehensive in the country" (Dykhuizen, p. 91) and included association with two elementary schools as well as the high school level Chicago Manual Training School. Eventually, Dewey's writing about education made him the acknowledged leader in American educational philosophy.

Dewey resigned his position at the University of Chicago in 1904 (after considerable political wrangling about various issues in the Department of Education). He was soon offered a professorship at Columbia University, with appointments in Philosophy and the Teacher's College. Dewey remained at Columbia until the end of his active teaching career in 1930, and his most noted works in philosophy and education were completed while he was associated with Columbia. He continued his teaching as an emeritus professor until 1939, and then retired completely from university activities. Dewey continued to write and speak about intellectual and social issues until shortly before his death on June 1, 1952.

