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QUENTIN ANDERSON

John Dewey's American Democrat

DESPITE THE FACT that nineteenth century American individualism is said to have encouraged greedy entrepreneurs, it is still thought of as having been a social good. It suggests multiplied opportunities for action, a chance to see and represent the world in the light of unique and valuable personal perspectives, and an effectual social pluralism. In many conventional accounts the individualism of nineteenth century America loses out when industrialism and such deterministic intellectual influences as evolution and scientific positivism come to frame the American's sense of his world. What these accounts suggest is that American individualism was snuffed out by the impersonality of an industrial or capitalist order. It is hardly surprising that, having proclaimed itself a democracy, America should have celebrated the removal of constraints on individual action and seen the coming of industrialism as a fresh kind of threat. But there has always been an error in the American assessment of the meaning of individualism.

The impersonality, the block character of the social scene had already been established before industrialism appeared. Individualism implies seeing the world as a whole, whether one views that whole as an oyster, as a J. P. Barnum did, or as adverse and threatening, as did Thoreau when he wrote the section of *Walden* called "Economy." If one views the social world as a whole, one will necessarily see it as impersonal. Individualism implies taking the world impersonally, and in this respect its underlying character remains the same—for the Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote before the Civil War and for the industrialist who appeared after the Civil War. We have discovered limited ways of acknowledging this: we say that Emerson's transcendentalism is congruent with the activities of robber barons; or that pragmatism encourages the belief that business is always socially beneficent. But these concessions operate to conceal the fundamental failure to see that individualism is a response to a social world that appears to the individual to be monolithic. What best complements American individualism—in fact, its only possible object—is an undifferentiated society. The judgments one makes about such a society are, by the same logic, judgments about the conditions that govern it, rather than feelings and beliefs about other people, since ties to other individuals or groups give the world a plural character.

The American individual is a person forced to get his sense of social reality wholesale; it is only marginally mediated by family, class, tradition, and region. These remain secondary to the looming social spectacle. To be oneself is first of all to be related to that spectacle; the weight of the problem of self-definition and of national definition are not easily separable. The question, What is an American? tended therefore to be given oddly inclusive answers during the nineteenth century, by foreign visitors and by Americans themselves. Emerson and Tocqueville saw the individual as having to find an identity in a society chiefly characterized by commercial pursuits, an aspect of America that led Emerson to seek another ground for his sense of self. In this light, the lonely individual is not so much conscious of his rights, of his liberty, and of manifold opportunities as he is frozen before a social spectacle so inclusive as to require an extravagant personal assertion, an identity founded on an equally inclusive personal claim.

Americans are often scolded for their inability to take history seriously. Since the days of Jackson they have been distinguishable in a way that Melville noted with high exasperation in 1849. In *Mardi*, a visitor calls the vociferously assertive Americans "sovereign-kings" and insists that, despite their boast that history culminates in them, the United States is just as subject to cataclysmic change as was the Roman Empire. This protest is made by someone who is himself a king, a member of a dynasty. The epithet he uses is precise. Melville is saying that Americans have claimed not kingship alone, but that they have incorporated the very idea of sovereignty in each individual, and that to do so is to defy temporal change. This inclusive personal assertion was a response to a perceived social reality. American individualism makes the claim to sovereign kingship because the American lives in a society in which his successful manipulation of the enviroing conditions of the present moment is crucial to his sense of himself. One does not oppose such a society by forming a party but rather by calling for a total transformation of the conditions.

It remains true that a great many Americans grow up with a disposition to conceive of social reality *en bloc*, a fact that enables one to link two familiar observations about the United States. Individuals who see their country *en bloc* and cherish the spectacle are led to use the puzzling expression "un-American," an expression that leads one to ask how such a large and various community can be said to exhibit a single pervasive character. Those who respond negatively to what they see as an overriding American condition must of course take a further imaginative step: they must disengage themselves from it, usually by creating a counterworld, which in Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau is the imaginative construct called "nature."

The premise that Americans see their own country as a whole in a far greater degree than do members of other Western societies licenses, and even requires, the study of individual Americans as more definitive of our culture than are members of other Western societies. If each bears more of the burden of both personal *and* national definition, each is by the same token a more "public" fact than is the individual Englishman, whose personal definition depends on a more effectually plural social world.

As Louis Hartz discovered, Americans do not appear able to imagine the United States as characterized by such an effectual pluralism of belief or interest.¹ In other societies, in which groups with variously intertwined social, reli-

gious, and economic interests are visibly contending, social forces wear human faces, slogans invite bloodshed, and parties have obvious and shifting relationships to a sovereignty distinguishably held by ascendant powers. By contrast, much of our national history appears rather weightless. It was not weightless for those who in various critical periods died or suffered or went hungry, yet these events in our past do not seem to have penetrated to a persisting core of indifference to, say, possible threats to our survival as a people, or to have affected the national incapacity to respond to bodies of ideas that might bring about basic social changes.

Recent attempts to understand this disposition seem only to scratch the surface. We must go farther back than Marcuse did when, in 1964, he said that capitalism had appropriated the very language in which proposals for social change might be expressed;² or than Christopher Lasch does when he speaks of a new narcissism as having arisen in the present century.³ Our assertion of sovereign kingship—an internally sanctioned power to define American reality—has for more than a century been matched by an incapacity to make fresh responses to the massive changes in our collective situation that industrialism, war, depression, and accelerated technological change have brought about.⁴ That incapacity has the character Toynbee attributed to Eskimo culture, speaking of it as exquisitely adapted to extreme conditions, like that of a man who has learned to cling to the face of a cliff.

John Dewey, the most socially engaged of our philosophers, offers a crucial instance of an extreme response to a cultural situation that has been provocative of extremity. Individuals, paradoxical though it may seem, have been the best indicators of common conditions in our society. The testimony of such commanding American imaginations as those of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman on the character of those conditions is indispensable. Dewey's importance in our cultural history arises directly out of his struggle with a problem posed by these three figures: How can a community made up of such individuals be conceived? Dewey was in his early twenties when Emerson died, and he lived and worked past the middle of our century. Although his powers are hardly as great as those of his three predecessors, his influence was demonstrably profound, especially as it contributed to our sense of ourselves as individuals and as members of the society.

It is significant that Dewey as philosopher, educator, and social reformer is now felt to be a consummately boring figure. We avoid him because he stands for something intolerable about the American condition that must be buried. He took the traditional declaration that the United States is a democracy with a seriousness for which there is no word except perhaps religious. This is the source of the obsessive quality in his prose we call bad writing; like Faulkner's Benjy, he is forever "trying to say" that, if we will but enter fully into the meaning of experience, American individualism can become the basis of a true community. Dewey's hopes are founded on a sense of individuals recognizably present in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, but we have lost the kind of faith in democracy Dewey had and thus fail to see his connection with them. Dewey's faith in democracy necessitated some alteration of the Emersonian vi-

sion of things, but its unmistakable continuity with that vision is too frequently ignored.

A story told of John Dewey that may well be apocryphal is nonetheless exemplary. The philosopher was sitting at his desk in his Long Island farmhouse when water began to drip on his papers. He went upstairs and opened the bathroom door. In the overflowing tub sat a child, who said, "Don't just stand there, John! Go get the mop!" The story is reminiscent of an episode in Rousseau's *Emile*. The tutor wishes to give Emile a sense of the impersonality of natural conditions. When the child breaks a window the tutor puts off having it repaired: Emile will learn that when one breaks a window one is chilly. No intervention of the human will is visible. But of course the tutor is stage manager; authority is present though masked. The story about Dewey takes us a step beyond Rousseau; the youngster in the bathtub is functioning in a world that is not conditioned by authority; child and father face a situation common to them both. They can start from scratch. Here is a matter that demands an appropriate means-end resolution—water is in the wrong place; clean it up! Responsibility and the need to demand it are not in question—the histories and passions of the two characters are stilled and sterilized by the child's definition of a problem and a solution.

The story is unfair because Dewey did call for a discipline somehow diffused in the ambient air of the home or classroom. Yet, in what it chiefly emphasizes, it is not in the least unfair. Dewey offered an account of human relationships in which people had no personal histories to color their encounters with one another. One could find a true beginning, a still point in time, a false present in which it was possible to start over. No reverberation of earlier moments affects this one. The intertwined, internalized elements of the human condition are eliminated; no sense that our peculiar histories play a part in every action is allowed to intrude. Pragmatism, when applied to human affairs, is a fairy tale of energies magically released from the conditions we know into what Dewey called the "situation," jointly apprehended by the problem-solvers involved. But pragmatism is utterly helpless before the encounter of two or more live persons. The philosophy that tries to make the method of inquiry a matter of daily practice has only a tangential relation to human actuality. This must be emphasized because of Dewey's well-known insistence that his thought aimed at reporting how things go among us, and because he often tells us that what he has to say about experience is designed to work *within* experience; to reconstruct it and make it more successful in bringing about desired consummations. At the turn of the century when Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and William Vaughan Moody saw their fellows as driven by beastliness boiling up from within, or helpless before natural and economic forces, Dewey stoutly maintained that we were in the saddle, that there was more day to dawn, that, as in Emerson and Whitman, this very moment was as full of possibility as any antecedent moment.

But how can the philosopher of practice be associated with the abstract and visionary Emerson? Put generally, it was Dewey's enduring preoccupation with a problem posed by Emerson's work that led him to turn to science and technology as means to realize the democracy. Emerson had said: "We shall meet again on a higher platform." Dewey set about building the platform. Dewey,

like Thoreau, Whitman, and even Melville, started from Emerson, because in Emerson the primary conception of American selfhood had been clearly and widely proclaimed.

Dewey was in his mid-forties when, on the occasion of Emerson's centenary in 1903, he called him "the philosopher of democracy." The conviction of Emerson's generation that each of us had a personal capacity to achieve a sufficient vision of reality had to be modified. The "platform" on which we were all to meet required a method for securing a common vision. Dewey did not alter Emerson's individual; what he altered was the conception of the means available to him to achieve a union with his fellows. Viewed from the outside, their accounts of our humanity are alike, equally fantastic in their denial of the primary significance of our sexuality, our propensity to conflict—both within and with others (and hence of our capacity to resolve conflict as well)—and the stubborn facts of instituted power within any given society. Both believed conflict and power would vanish in the common awareness of wholly attainable ideals. Stated positively, they hoped society could be transformed through a shared perception of universal conditions.

Three sentences from *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, illustrate the assumption Dewey shared with Emerson. "This common understanding of the means and ends of action is the essence of social control. It is indirect, or emotional and intellectual, not direct or personal. Moreover it is intrinsic to the disposition of the person, not external and coercive."⁵ These sentences are fairly staggering, whether read in context or out. Dewey is easily enough followed if we understand him to say that society does not function by giving orders all day long; that people do what they are expected to do because it is their impulse to do what is expected of them. When we ask, however, whether this is indeed the result of something "intrinsic" which is at the same time a "common understanding," we may well feel that the sentences bridge a chasm with a formula. Dewey has fantasized a tie between individuals and groups; there is no such magical consonance between self and society, nor do these terms refer to any imaginable psychic organization in which such transactions can take place. These are drastically edited or mutilated conceptions of both individuals and groups. Dewey's notion of communication as a literal making common of the information possessed by two or more people can only be realized within a system as impersonal as that of a computer. All political philosophy could be inserted between what is said to be "intrinsic" in a particular mind and what is said to be a "common understanding," and the gap would still remain largely open.

In such flat and determinedly innocent sentences, couched in a prose meant to be widely available to teachers, we hear the nineteenth century echoes that lead us back to Dewey's earlier work. Both Emerson and Whitman had insisted that our ties to others must be those created by "indirection," by our common apprehension of things, that simply cancels the often harsh encounters of alien wills, groups, and interests.

We are accustomed to think of Dewey in connection with a scientific positivism current in the 1920s that, we have lately been told, was actually a mask for power, for covert economic domination. But the early Dewey, who explicitly disavowed Comte's positivism, is working in a quite different American vein, in

which the connection of the individual with his inward vision operates as a sufficient guarantee of reality. Yet, a persistent effort to see the world only from one's own perspective precludes a full recognition of human others; it leads ultimately to an emphasis on what can be universally apprehended, like the periodic table of elements. This is true whether you try to possess the whole in vision or simply see it as an order which you as an individual can profit by. In this formal sense, a John D. Rockefeller, who perceives the possibility of using rebates from the railways in order to organize an oil trust, and an Emerson are alike; they have both seen the world as an impersonal order by seeing it as an object for the self that is susceptible to definition and manipulation. This is an American phenomenon; not every social world is open to apprehension as a whole. In France or England it would have been impossible during the nineteenth century to be either a Rockefeller or an Emerson. One would have had to reckon, like the hero of a *bildungsroman*, with a plurality of persons and institutions, and choose a path in relation to them.

To be an individualist in this sense is quite distinct, of course, from being a crank or an eccentric: it is to encounter the object of your experience as a whole, whether for the purposes of vision or of acquisition. What looks like a paradox in Emerson is not, as a personal attitude, a paradox at all. In 1830 Emerson wrote: "It seems to be true that the more exclusively idiosyncratic a man is, the more general and infinite he is. . . ." Or, as Dewey put it in his first ambitious essay over half a century later: "Transcendentalism was incomplete until it recognized that the universal consciousness can be realized only in an individual bearer." Dewey is referring not to what is called transcendentalism in this country, but to the whole German tradition from Kant to Hegel and beyond, and he is revising it in the Emersonian mode. In this essay of 1886, "Psychology as Philosophic Method," he wrote what Emerson was too consistently inconsistent to write, a sketch for an Emersonian metaphysics. Dewey's commentators, who shuffle this essay out of sight or cite it as an aberration, have distorted the whole question of Dewey's primary focus in the eighties and nineties of the last century. They speak of the first important phase of his development as Hegelian, as qualified by his attachment to the idea of the universal mind, and simply fail to note that "mind" had to have an "individual bearer"—precisely the Emersonian position.

Again, his commentators use philosophic vocabularies that simply do not engage the area of Dewey's most personal concern in these years: his passionate absorption in the idea of democracy, which he held to with religious fervor. If the individual could be brought into communion with society without losing his unique access to the universal, Dewey's problem would be solved. What Dewey got from Hegel in the years following 1886 was, as he saw it, continuous with what he got from Darwin. To enable the "individual bearer" of Emerson's generation to join his fellows, he needed a conception of a social process in which the bearer figured. Hegel offered an account of society in which a developing truth was immanent, and for Dewey this development had a basis in the plasticity of our biological endowment that he found in Darwin. This movement toward union was adumbrated in his favorite Emerson essays, but the idea of a developing and self-correcting body of scientific inquirers offered what seemed to him a more satisfactory model for tying individuals together in a society.

Each individual would have access to a developing body of truth, rather than to that static vision of the whole that Emerson frequently fell back on. Instead of being the puppet of universal mind, as in Hegel, each citizen would be potentially a possessor of all that was known and knowable.

Dewey hoped for individuals who would be both free and capable of recognizing, and acting on, a shared perception of reality. In his book on Leibnitz, Dewey describes Leibnitz's monads as "a true democracy, in which each citizen has sovereignty."⁶ How could Dewey bring about such a democracy in the United States? The monads, whose form is individual and whose content is universal—that is, each is a recapitulation of the whole—together with the similar conception of the individual in the elder Henry James—in which the form is once again particular, the content incipiently universal—are far more relevant to Dewey's work in the 1890s than is Hegel. Dewey's ambitious essay of 1886 had as its core the sentence already quoted: "Transcendentalism was incomplete until it recognized that the universal consciousness can be realized only in an individual bearer." It provoked a withering retort from William James's English correspondent, Shadworth Hodgson, who, replying in the same British journal, *Mind*, called Dewey's position "a shortcut indeed to the deification of the individual." Dewey was stung and shaken, as his later work reveals. Hodgson had no sense of the cultural extremity that Dewey's subscription to democracy imposed on him—the unsolved Emersonian problem of the union of the citizens—nor did his fellow Americans, William James or Santayana. A brief account of Dewey's career helps us to see how different his situation was from theirs.

In reading the young Dewey one of the first things we feel is his demand that the world be shaped in accordance with his desire to master it. Yet Dewey was exceedingly able; he could master philosophic systems with ease and had an obvious gift for philosophic exposition and a prose often far more lucid than that of his later work. Nonetheless, beside the more sophisticated William James and Santayana, Dewey must be described as having a tin ear, both for the distinctive qualities of things and for the ways of language.

He was, and remained, a provincial, yet a peculiarly representative one. At the same time he had a fire in his belly—the appetite to prevail. And how much more he had seen of the United States than James or Santayana! Dewey had grown up and been educated in Burlington, Vermont. He taught high school in Oil City, Pennsylvania; attended our first graduate school on the German model, Johns Hopkins; and subsequently taught philosophy at Michigan. At Chicago, as professor of pedagogy as well as philosophy, he encountered in the university, at Jane Addams's Hull House, and in the schools the problems of creating a democracy in urban America. He finally settled at Columbia where he taught until 1930. Dewey had an extraordinary insight into the generic situation of the intellectual heirs of Emerson's period, but he was, as Neil Coughlan has shrewdly noted, simply unaware of the "richness and density" of the social and intellectual life led by his English contemporaries.⁷ No American could call him a hick, but a cultivated European would have found him ineradicably provincial.

Unlike James and Santayana, whose upbringings had fostered a measure of detachment from a country undergoing an industrial transformation with all its consequences for the democracy, Dewey seemed to feel that the whole country

was in some way his affair. It was his inner imperative that American reality be brought into accord with the democratic vision. He copied the ways of the professors—and it should be noted that he was a member of the first generation that profited fully by the founding of actual universities across the country. He tried, within the terms exacted by his professorial status, to fight for the people at large; he denounced economic tyranny and said repeatedly that our hopes lay with the nascent democracy. Santayana's transplantation to another culture must have seemed inconceivable to him. Precisely because he was so caught up in his time and place (he even found a way to be a Christian, a social gospeller, up into the 1890s), his impulse to implant his demanding dream in the minds of his fellow citizens and his success in doing so make him representative of an important strain in the national consciousness.

During the late 1880s and the 1890s, that is to say, his late twenties and his thirties, Dewey put most of his energies into texts and course outlines in psychology and ethics. He emphasized these over the metaphysics and logic that preoccupied his contemporaries, because, as he put it, "Psychology is the democratic movement come to consciousness." In other words, the "sovereign-kings" had to become aware of the nature of their responsibility in a democracy. In an encyclopedia contribution of 1894 Dewey says that Hegel had shifted the basis of morality from Kant's abstract reason to the "unified life of society," and Dewey meant to do nothing less. What has been ignored is that what Dewey had on hand when he set about trying to unite us was not a complex image of society derived from Hegel or anyone else; it was a stock of Emersonian individuals. His society would be a far cry from Hegel's, since it looked toward a future in which individuals had assumed the full burden that fell upon them with the disappearance of every external authority.

Dewey paid a heavy price to bring about the union of Emersonian individuals. His individuals had extraordinary powers as communicators and joint actors with their fellows; they shared a "common understanding" of such impersonal, ahistorical concerns as technology. But unlike Emerson's, they had no consciousness of a struggle with a recurring inner division in the self. Emerson (in this respect still a Christian) had acknowledged an internal difficulty in sustaining his vision of things; Dewey's individual bearer had none. He had to grant, as Dewey often put it in the 1890s, that he was "partial" or "incomplete"; but he need not admit, as Emerson so often did, that he had a built-in doubleness, that there was an abiding encounter between his lesser worldly ego and the grand ego of his widest vision. Dewey found it necessary to suppress the relationships that occupied Emerson's lesser ego.

The essay that most conveniently exhibits the consequences of Dewey's willingness to sacrifice distinctive ties to human others, to wife, to child, to neighbor is called, somewhat misleadingly, "The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge," published in 1897. It seems to foretell an imminent secular apocalypse. Like most of Dewey's uses of history, it tacitly assumes that we have now overcome what was limiting about the past; history for Dewey is generally an account of the resolution of false dualisms that keep us from plunging into that ongoing wave of experience within which we are—or are just about to be—immersed. Although ostensibly about epistemology, the essay actually deals with epistemology as symptomatic of a struggle between conservative rational-

ists and progressive empiricists, now happily resolved. Dewey begins by telling us that philosophy had been born in Greece when “the time of direct and therefore unconscious union with corporate life, finding therein stimuli, codes, and values, had departed.” Dewey says this led to Socrates’ practical questions about the proper goals of life, but unfortunately these practical concerns gave way to the work of theoreticians. Theory was split off from practice, and under the Roman Empire and the medieval church, knowledge was purveyed exclusively by external authority. When during the Renaissance the individual arose, he had to take matters into his own hands. In the passages that follow, Dewey tells how the individual became qualified to cope with this new and overwhelming burden, which is to say, how democracy became possible.

The entire problem of medieval philosophy is that of absorption, of assimilation. The result was the creation of the individual. Hence the problem of modern life is that of reconstruction, reform, reorganization. The entire content of experience needs to be passed through the alembic of individual agency and realization. The individual is to be the bearer of civilization; but this involves a remaking of the civilization which he bears. Thus we have the dual question: How can the individual become the organ of corporate action? How can he make over the truth authoritatively embodied in institutions of church and state into frank, healthy and direct expression of the simple act of free living? On the other hand how can civilization preserve its own integral value and import when subordinated to the agency of the individual instead of exercising supreme sway over him?

After noting that epistemology cannot provide the method the individual requires for doing what he must now do, Dewey continues:

Admitting that the practical problem of modern life is the maintenance of the spiritual values of civilization, through the medium of the insight and decision of the individual, the problem is foredoomed to futile failure save as the individual in performing his task can work with a definite and controllable tool. This tool is science.

Science, it is important to note, comes on stage as enabling the creation of a community composed of those I have here named “sovereign-kings.”

Given the freed individual, who feels called upon to create a new heaven and a new earth, and who feels himself gifted with the power to perform the task to which he is called:—and the demand for science, for a method of discovering and verifying truth becomes imperious. The individual is henceforth to supply control, law, and not simply stimulation and initiation. What does this mean but that instead of any longer receiving or assimilating truth he is now to search for and create it? Having no longer the truth imposed by authority to rely upon, there is no recourse save to secure the authority of truth.

The self-corrective method of Charles Sanders Peirce’s community of scientific investigators, who had to answer to each other for the results they published, has been widened and distorted to serve the democracy. Dewey uses that method as a sort of social cement: since the results of inquiry will be apparent to all, all will be bound by those results. Of course this assertion becomes far more sophisticated later in Dewey’s new logic of inquiry, which took its first form in the *Studies in Logical Theory* of 1903. Yet the initial assertion stands: democracy

must depend on a common method of knowing and of testing its knowledge; citizens are to be associated not by what grows out of their shared lives and histories and the ideas and hopes that grow out of these, but by a method of discovering what is here called "truth." History is as definitely transcended as it is in Emerson.

To focus exclusively on Dewey's shifting engagement with systems of thought is to lose any sense of the urgency of his situation in the culture. His principal shift of emphasis must be described in terms that relate him to that situation. In order to unite the individual with a hoped-for community, Dewey had to give a new content to the "Absolute" to which the individual bearer of the 1886 essay "Psychology as Philosophic Method" had been tied; by which, in fact, he had been constituted. In this essay we are told that to know *as* he knew was the only way to know, and that he was the only authority. As Dewey put it, "But that the universe has no existence except as absolutely realized in an individual, that is, except in self consciousness, is precisely the result of philosophy, and can therefore be no objection to such a consideration of the universe: in fact such a statement only amounts to saying that psychology considers the universe as it really is." No wonder Hodgson had charged Dewey with deifying the individual!

Dewey is carrying forward both Emerson's assertion of self-reliance *and* the access to universal truth that ultimately justifies self-reliance. To say this is an idealist position once held by a man who became a pragmatist or instrumentalist begs the important question. Dewey's use of the term "psychology," which looks so strange to us, is warning enough that what he wants is a way of tying Emersonian man to his fellows, to the democracy, and this is why he must substitute science and a self-corrective method of finding truth for the absolute. Dewey's own account of this shift is quite as external and misleading as those of his commentators. But we can get a sense of what happened by juxtaposing the essay of 1886, "Psychology as Philosophic Method," which had provoked Hodgson to scold him for deifying individuals, with the essay "Psychology and Philosophic Method," published thirteen years later in 1899. Here, Dewey responds unmistakably to Hodgson's attack. Referring to an earlier historical period in which all authority was imposed on the individual from without, and the individual as such was subject to a "low valuation," Dewey goes on:

As against all this, the assertion is ventured that psychology, supplying us with a knowledge of the behavior of experience, is a conception of democracy. Its postulate is that since experience fulfills itself in individuals, since it administers itself through their instrumentality, the account of the course and method of this achievement is a significant and indispensable affair.

Democracy is possible only because of a change in intellectual conditions. It implies tools for getting at truth in detail, and day by day, as we go along. Only such possession justifies the surrender of fixed, all-embracing principles to which, as universals, all particulars are subject for valuation and regulation. Without such possession, it is only the courage of the fool that would undertake the venture to which democracy has committed itself—the ordering of life in response to the needs of the moment in accordance with the ascertained truth of the moment. Modern life involves the deification of the here and the now; of the specific, the particular, the unique, that which happens once and has no measure of value save such as it brings with itself. Such deification is monstrous fetishism, unless the deity be there; unless the universal lives, moves, and has its being in experience individualized.

The “tools for getting at truth in detail” (the method of science) enable Dewey to say in effect, “Take that, Shadworth Hodgson!” Dewey has replaced his earlier version of the universal with the moving front of perennially reconstructed vision that science makes possible. Immersed in this sense of things we can all apprehend reality in the same way.

Dewey has a much feebler grasp of human actuality than Emerson, who had celebrated the moment of experience but remained aware of an element in himself, a petty ego, that militated against the total coherence he tried for. But Dewey was never to have any way of describing internal struggle. The following passages from his ethical writings of the 1890s suggest how scoured of negations and limitations his individual was. He speaks of the emotion of anger as taking two forms: simple hostility against another person diminishes you by making you feel less “complete,” but anger at a piece of meanness, “serves to do away with that meanness and braces the self.” Dewey goes on to make it plain that the effect on our inner kingdom rather than the effect on others is the basis for the judgment of an impulse: “the completest possible interaction of an impulse with all other experiences, or the completest possible relation of an impulse to the whole self constitutes the predicate or moral value, of an act.”

The criterion for the discrimination of right and wrong, he holds, is their effect on the interrelated experiences that make up the self; as in Emerson, we do not have to go outside or consult an external standard to make a judgment of what we have done. He writes:

The basis for discrimination between “right” and wrong in the judgment is found in the fact that some acts tend to narrow the self, to introduce friction into it, to weaken its power, and in various ways to *disintegrate* it, while other acts tend to expand, invigorate, harmonize, and in general organize the self.

What is primary for Dewey is the extension of our inner kingdom. One of his ways of describing our relation to society in these years is to say that this expansion of the individual is a fulfillment of the society’s truly democratic self, what all would hope for when they came to see what democracy implied.

Dewey values the intimations in certain of Emerson’s essays, in particular, “Fate,” “Compensation,” and “Spiritual Laws”—intimations that Emerson shared his own sense of the self as growing, moving forward, and generating its ideals internally instead of putting them ahead of us as something forever unattainable. And Dewey finds the ethical position of the elder Henry James akin to Emerson’s. He echoes the elder James when he writes, “The consciousness of goodness is the consciousness of a completely unified self. If the agent is thinking of his own glory, or credit, or moral worth, or improvement, he is by that fact *divided*; there is the deed to be performed and the reflection of it into himself.” What Dewey is saying is that to enter into the moving wave of continually reconstructed vision we have to be internally coherent to a degree that Emerson himself would have found beyond belief.

Dewey’s attempt to incorporate the practical affairs of life *within* the visionary’s possession of the “universal” led to the most extravagant and most nationally influential of his fantasies, his conception of the school. This was the work of his Chicago years. It was preceded by Dewey’s curious involvement with Franklin Ford, which occurred while he was still at the University of Michigan. Dewey found a way to diffuse awareness of the fashion in which we were all

joined together: the thing could be done by publishing a newspaper! Ford, who, as a journalist, was dazzled by the possibility that a wealth of information about the workings of the economy could be digested and presented to the public in such transparent form, that everyone would see just how the interests of the people at large were being betrayed, got Dewey to agree to edit such a paper. Everyone would be able to see that the activities of pork packers, senators, and railway barons composed a pattern inimical to the welfare of the people. As we might have put it in 1970, a complete and totally persuasive democratic counter-culture was possible. The newspaper, as Dewey wrote William James, would be the only organ of the society with an unbiased interest in the common welfare, and at the same time, a commodity indispensable to the majority; it would inevitably make money.

Historians of ideas, or of pragmatism itself, who treat Dewey's career as if its significance depended wholly on his handling of recognized philosophic issues, or who neglect the way in which his positions in philosophy or educational theory were overdetermined by emotional needs that corresponded to socially diffused needs, can make little of the Franklin Ford episode or of Dewey's involvement in the culture in general. The Ford scheme aroused Dewey's intense and quasi-religious sense of his mission to the democracy. All the readers of his newspaper would simultaneously become aware, each on his own hook, yet all together, of the truth about the society at large. Each a monad, then—the form individual, the content universal! But Ford was an odd chap; perhaps the glitter in his eye warned Dewey. After actually announcing publication, Dewey drew back, and the matter was silently dropped.

It was at Chicago that Dewey founded the Laboratory School. What Dewey asks of the school, as George E. Axtelle, one of his editors remarks, is incredible. A space station frees us from gravity alone; Dewey's school is an earth station—freed from the effects of sexual determination, externally imposed authority, "economic stress," class and status, and every form of conflict—yet all the information children need for growth is said to penetrate the walls. In *School and Society*, published in 1900, Dewey prints a flow chart of the school and its enviroing influences: the city, the country, the laboratory, the library. The school is the visible node of the working of what I have called reconstructive vision; it instills an absorbed awareness of the "method of intelligence." It is hard to convey Dewey's passion about it, but perhaps his fervor can be suggested. In *School and Society*, speaking of what happens to the child's imagination of the world when studying the beginnings of life on earth, he remarks:

Where we now see only the outward doing and the outward product, there behind all visible results, is the readjustment of mental attitude, the enlarged and sympathetic vision, the sense of growing power, and the willing ability to identify both insight and capacity with the interests of the world and man. . . . When nature and society can live in the schoolroom, when the forms and tools of learning are subordinated to the substance of experience, then shall there be an opportunity for this identification, and culture shall be the democratic password.

For Dewey the schools became the cutting edge of democratic advance and the primary means of social reform. That he got so many people to share this fantasy is one of the most interesting clues we have about recent cultural history. "In education," Dewey writes,

meet the three most powerful motives of human activity. . . . Copartnership of these three motives, of affection [he means, of course, for children], of social growth, and of scientific inquiry—must prove as nearly irresistible as anything human when they are once united. And, above all else, recognition of the spiritual basis of democracy, the efficacy and responsibility of freed intelligence is necessary to secure this union.

No attempt is made here to assess the meaning of the public response to the philosopher's educational writings, or to try to say in what ways the schools that sprang up in Dewey's wake were little substitute worlds built with taxes. But it is clear that he had once more envisioned a substitute world—as he had in the case of the abortive newspaper project—envisioned, that is, a scene in which individuals could be united to other individuals through their grasp of something universal.

John Dewey's American democrat was originally conceived as an answer to the problem Emerson had set; that of making a democracy of individuals whose solitary and unlimited visions had guaranteed their identity. If we are properly naïve, we ask, "But won't their visions overlap if we bring them all together?" And Dewey, in effect, replies: "I have found an all-purpose vision in the method of science; everybody can use it; it is universal!" A child sitting in the classroom is offered an ever-widening dominion—mastery of the way things go in nature—on the condition that we all share the same light. A phrase of Whitman's helps us to understand Dewey's hope. Whitman says that "one eyesight does not countervail another eyesight"; we may all possess the world in vision without interfering with each other.

But the major books of Dewey's later career do not succeed in preserving the individual bearer, who becomes all bearer and loses all individuality. To read *Experience and Nature* is to be simultaneously aware of Dewey's mastery of technical philosophic issues and of a pervasive undersong, the tone of Faulkner's Benjy who is "trying to say." Dewey tries to immerse us in an experiential continuum that is clearly a fantasy unrealizable at any time because it depends upon ironing out all the differences between those who are to be immersed in it. They are abstract people who all receive the same messages, rather than people with histories like ourselves. Dewey, in fact, says that to conceive of experience one need not posit a self at all.

Yet this is the Dewey who in 1938 headed the commission to investigate the fabricated charges preferred against Trotsky at the Moscow trials and who had a long and honorable record as a scrapper for the rights of citizens of the democracy. He had split his Emerson, yet he did not discard either the man with access to the universal or the individual as citizen. Horace M. Kallen, a longtime associate of Dewey, describes this split in an admirable essay in which he shows that Dewey's holistic, perhaps even "transcendental" version of existence simply ran alongside his persistent assertion of the indispensable worth of the individual.⁸ This rather empty assertion represented his fidelity to the attempt to realize the democracy he had undertaken in his youth.

The perception that in Dewey one finds the last gasp of the American faith in democracy—the individual is eviscerated in behalf of impersonal system, yet

maintained as a citizen with rights—leads to another conclusion about the four decades that have followed 1938, the year in which the report on Trotsky was issued. During these four decades many able Americans have behaved like the nineteenth century individualists described here. They have seen the society as an adverse whole, and they have tried to make a massive counterclaim. In 1938 they found such a counterclaim in Stalinism, an impersonal system that sopped up all history to reveal apocalyptic vision. They have since made counterclaims less overtly political, such as those made for the sufficiency of art or language as universal systems that enclose us all. Americans seem to retain an original impulse to shore up their identities by claiming either a sufficient vision or command of an impersonal system that will serve to defend them against a society they persist in regarding as adverse to them. In this context Dewey looks transitional, a man who retained, at the price of his own consistency, a faith in democracy we have quite lost. But the fact that ties Dewey to us and most directly affects the prospects for American society is that Dewey did not get his power or his influence as the proponent of democracy; he got it, as most now do, by offering his fellows an ostensibly impersonal, ostensibly sufficient vision.

I am thinking, of course, of the many intellectuals who now try to catch us up in a universe of discourse either tacitly or explicitly self-contained, a systematic, all-inclusive view, whether it be of demography, econometrics, or literary criticism. Such portable worlds are immune to the questions and judgments of others—as nakedly inclusive and assertive as Whitman's "Song of Myself"—and have come to characterize intellectual activity in this country. Stripped of any acknowledgment of a company of peers who might judge them, such schemes are also—like Emerson's moments of inclusive vision—focused on the conditions attributed to our world, and simply exclude full-fledged human others, personalities who are qualified by their histories, yet free to act within these limitations.

Proponents of ostensibly self-contained systems are not forced to acknowledge personal agency or their limitations; they have a curious similarity to corporations. It is as if many people had found themselves impelled by the character of the American world to try to apprehend it as a set of conditions rather than as a human scene. The unparalleled material success of the nation has provoked a profound psychic disaffection, yet the disaffection mirrors the impersonality it habitually condemns. Both those who cherish and those who disdain American conditions have an impoverished awareness of other people.

I am hopeful enough to believe that comprehension of the history of American individualism may help us to see the character of our impoverishment. It is important that we understand Dewey and pragmatism. I have referred to Dewey's positions as fantastic, as fostering widespread illusions. His view of men, women, and children reduces them to interchangeable communicators and cancels their personal histories; his schools aim at immersing children in an experiential flux magically credited with the power of social transformation. His conception of experience itself is an attempt to dragoon us all into his visionary wave.

Israel Scheffler has described the work of Dewey and other pragmatists as positing a continuity within experience which their philosophic writings do not support.⁹ I have tried to show that such a totalized view of the world arises

among those who seize on it as an object for the self; and that our cultural climate has so diffused the impulse to make this wholesale appropriation, that these philosophers were not conscious of the difficulty, cited by Scheffler, of assimilating theory to practice, or of the impossibility I have emphasized—the assumption of a literally common context for communication and action, an assumption that Dewey's affirmation of our distinctive personal worth simply contradicts.

In effect, this assumption is Dewey's claim to unlimited power, quite as much a claim to power as that of any other sufficient system. It appears that Emerson's longing for the day when the most private vision would be the most public vision is close to being realized. The consequence for our associated life is that we no longer seem to have any way of referring to its nature and requirements. Yet it seems clear that thought about human affairs can hardly come to much unless we can learn to prize the achievement of actual individuation and to call on a plurality of judging selves for solutions to our problems.

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- ⁴Quentin Anderson, Preface to *The Imperial Self* (Knopf, New York: 1971).
- ⁵John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: 1916), p. 47. *Intellectual* as used here refers to a common grasp of the meaning of a shared activity.
- ⁶John Dewey, *Leibniz's New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding* (Chicago: 1888), reprinted in the *The Early Works of John Dewey*, I: 1882-1888 (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, Ill.: 1969), p. 295.
- ⁷Neil Coughlan, *Young John Dewey* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1975), p. 109. Coughlan assimilates Dewey's Emersonian strain to his interest in the neo-Hegelians. But Dewey modified these thinkers in behalf of the democracy, and in this way preserved his kinship with Emerson.
- ⁸Horace M. Kallen, "Individuality, Individualism and John Dewey," *Antioch Review*, XIX, Fall 1959, 299-314.
- ⁹Israel Scheffler, *Four Pragmatists: A Critical Introduction to Peirce, James, Mead and Dewey* (Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: 1974).