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# Liberal Education, Philosophy, and Education for Democracy: The American Philosophical Association and Philosophy in American Education

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## Philosophy's Role in Society and Education

In 1943, the American Philosophical Association (APA), founded in 1900, created a committee funded by the Rockefeller Foundation "to undertake an examination of the present state of philosophy and the role philosophy might play in the postwar world." The committee, in a series of regional meetings, worked on different types of enquiry, philosophy and education, the theoretical impact of philosophy in the community, teaching of philosophy to influence everyday life and education. The APA's report, Philosophy in American Education, published in 1945, focuses largely on the challenge philosophers face in teaching philosophical ideas, concepts, and methods to undergraduate and graduate students who increasingly are interested in the "special preparation for what the student is later to do...that they qualify their products for a job, and the job is specific and practical."2 This vocational training aspect of higher education runs counter to calls for the return to a liberal education model with the study of philosophy as an important component. "We were appointed," they opine, "to inquire into the present and the possible place of philosophy in liberal education." Modern education, they argue, relegates liberal education to a minor place in favor of preparation for what students are later to do. They maintain that "Philosophy at its best is a long, hard business, and it is by no means always at its best in the chaotic, fragmentary world of contemporary experience." Ultimately, the authors sought a philosophy of higher education in which philosophy and professors of philosophy would find a more significant role. In this essay I first describe the origins and content of the APA's report, Philosophy in American Education, I then address its criticisms, especially those of John Dewey in his collected essays, Problems of Men, and finally those of Alexander Meiklejohn in his review of Philosophy in American Education.

### **The American Philosophical Association Report**

Commissioned to investigate the role of philosophy in society, the APA committee sought to clarify "the demands, the conflicts, the doubts, and the self-criticism that was brewing in the philosophical community." They identified the "major demands of philosophy," suggesting the integration of philosophical study into the curriculum. They thought this would add a philosophical umbrella over the social and physical sciences and provide a broader worldview. In the development of core curricula, they sought to identify the role of philosophy. The integration of philosophy into a core curriculum would serve to make philosophy, they reasoned, more relevant. Second, philosophy can provide the educated of any discipline a mutual intellectual content across vocational specialties.<sup>6</sup> The third demand of philosophy is a proposed reinterpretation of democracy, that a "positive view of what democracy stands for, of what liberty, justice, equality mean, would seem to be needed." The group suggested a philosophy of democracy that would rival the philosophic basis of communism, fascism, or the National Socialist leadership cult and the assumption of racial superiority.8 These moves then would allow reinterpretation of democracy in light of the misuse of the democratic processes that subsumed democratic values in ethnocentrism, racism, nationalism, and social megalomania, views to which it seems we are still susceptible. The three demands culminate in a fourth: a request for the development of a life philosophy as a basis for day-to-day living.9 This proposed new philosophy rests on the assumption that traditional religious faith and moral idealism are waning, leaving philosophers as the "chief agents of society for clarifying, formulating, and justifying the ends of human life."10 To provide this new basis for their philosophy of democracy, or life philosophy, the authors sought the restructuring of education to focus upon philosophical study as the foundation for broader educational ends.

Such an education would be based on "the metaphysics of ancient and medieval thinkers and have it proceed exclusively by study of great books of the past." Such a

...liberal education is the sort of education that fits a man, who has power in the community and is free to employ his time as he chooses, to employ it in a manner worthy of the responsibilities that go with the privileges of his position.<sup>12</sup>

A liberal education provides the privilege of position appropriate in a stratified society, the personal, social, and economic traits of the educated.<sup>13</sup> Others, those of

...inner bondage...[are slaves] to the passion, the impulse, the whim, or the temptation of the moment. Man gains freedom from this sort of slavery in proportion as his various desires,

interests, and powers become integrated with one another. ... Thought, by coordinating man's impulses, tends to free him from blind bondage.<sup>14</sup>

A philosophy-based, liberal education, therefore, consists of the freedom that comes from the

...liberation of man from the bondage that arises from ignorance, prejudice, and narrowness...possession of a comprehensive view of the variety of human discoveries, achievements, and capacities; and appreciative insight into the typical values for which men live—in short, it means possession of perspective.<sup>15</sup>

The goal of such a liberal education would be self-disciplined graduates who accept that learning is lifelong. Education does not end with graduation. Indeed, a college education should provide a basis for the continuous exploration of the social and cultural fields which make up their experience. As for educational philosophy, the report authors defer to Aristotle. Not the scientific Aristotle whose "admirable powers of scientific observation, criticism, and theoretical construction employed so effectively to push forward the knowledge and thought of his time," but the metaphysical Aristotle, for whom the slave class exists by nature of birth and is fit only for training. This class, say the authors, "are actually more ignorant, undiscerning, selfish, unskilled, weak, insensitive, clumsy, callous, sickly, cruel, uncouth, wanton, and unjust than human beings need be."

These demands on philosophy consist of many conflicting viewpoints and issues concerning philosophy's place in society. Philosophers find contentment in the abstract minutiæ of the academic studies of philosophy and philosophical systems more than in the realities of day-to-day life. They take a kind of metacognitive role in seeking insight into truth, reality, beauty, morality, thinking, logic, and knowledge. The debate is over the nature of philosophy itself, is it contemplative or active? What is the social function of philosophy and philosophers? Is philosophy a discrete study or does it attach to other disciplines? Why do most philosophers avoid meaningful engagement with society?

Individuals analyzing or responding to antecedent thinkers and creatively adding their own ideas caused philosophy to devolve into systems: fields of study with discrete assumptions, methodologies, and enquiries. Reviewers of the APA's report often provide a standard restatement and summary. Marten Ten Hoor (1890–1967) believed most philosophy professors would find themselves in agreement with the APA's report, while recognizing there would be considerable disagreement about how to reach the report's stated goals. Finally, Ten Hoor emphasizes the thoughtful planning of students' course programs in philosophy and the absolute importance of great teaching.<sup>19</sup>

## **APA Report: Critique of Pragmatism**

The APA authors began with a pessimistic view of U.S. culture given the decay of the authority of religion, the family, and society. They found "confusion and relativism, and the waning of common standards of behavior," lamenting that "communication too often seeks the level of some lowest common denominator—taxes, the Dodgers, or the weather."<sup>20</sup> Philosophers, then, have the responsibility to become "the intellectual conscience of the community."21 In the authors' view "philosophic judgement is most weighty and most needed" in the search for "general standards of right and wrong, the nature of justice, the very continuance of the conditions under which a rational life can be lived."22 And while they admit a love for abstraction and a tendency only to communicate with themselves, they are satisfied with their standing in such a historically respected endeavor.<sup>23</sup> They focus on the old ideals and absolutes. They deny that philosophers accept pragmatism as a part of professional philosophy since pragmatism does not accept that the problems of philosophy are beyond that of experience. They hold that "hard and exact thinking in which ideas that lay claim to philosophical validity are submitted to distinctively philosophical tests of clarity, comprehensiveness, and ultimacy."24 Such clarity, comprehensiveness, and ultimacy are obtainable through a strengthening of the liberal-education schema focused upon the wisdom of philosophical reflection. This critical analysis of Pragmatism was nothing new. Therefore, *Philosophy in American Education* authors focused more intently on the teaching of philosophy in higher education than on the status and role of philosophy in postwar society.

Pragmatism was based on the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) who, in the early 1870s, coined the term pragmatism and later (1877–1878) examined its place in philosophy and logic in a series of Popular Science Monthly articles. William James (1842-1910) began to refine pragmatic ideas with his 1898 California lecture, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," in which he notes that "they can always bring down the effective meaning of any philosophic proposition to some particular consequence, in our future practical experience."<sup>25</sup> The authors of Philosophy and American Education, though, found Pragmatism wanting as a means to "recover philosophy."26 In criticizing Pragmatism, the report's authors state that Pragmatism seems "a subordination of the 'highest' human functions to 'lower' and more mundane interests."<sup>27</sup> The pragmatist, they continue, has had to "defend the ultimacy of this human standpoint—man as the intelligent planner of his own destiny through social co-operation in a natural world—against all those philosophies which seek to transcend it in some absolute and antecedent reality."28 They accuse the pragmatist of trying "to carry his teachings beyond the limits of 'professional philosophy' and to see them to solve the 'problems of men' wherever philosophy can be of constructive use in their resolution."<sup>29</sup>

This criticism in *Philosophy in American Education*, was the latest (in 1945) among critiques from the rationalist, idealist, absolutist, and transcendental philosophers that began in earnest with Josiah Royce who, in his 1903 Presidential Address at the American Philosophy Association, "The Eternal and the Practical," wrote, "Everything is practical; and everything seeks nothing whatever but its own true self, which is the Eternal." He castigates Pragmatism for its dependence upon experience and its denial of the eternal, ideal, or transcendent conception of truth. Royce's ideas concerning the role of philosophy focus on a new synthesis of his conception of voluntarism and absolutism which did not allow for the type of integration envisioned by the authors of *Philosophy in American Education*. In Dewey's response to Royce in his own 1905 APA Presidential Address, "Beliefs and Realities," he finds that "thinking is inquiry, and that knowledge as science is the outcome of systematically directed inquiry." He says,

The radical empiricist [William James], the humanist [F. C. S. Schiller], the pragmatist...believes not in fewer but in more realities than the orthodox philosophies warrant. He is not concerned, for example, in discrediting objective realities, or logical or universal thinking; but in such a reinterpretation of the sort of reality which these things possess as via authorize the accrediting, without depreciation, of concrete empirical conscious centers of action and passion.<sup>33</sup>

Dewey considered the APA report and the subject it considered of minor importance to the public in relation to possibilities open to the field of philosophy and the work of philosophers if they would simply focus on knowledge gained through experience instead of ultimate reality and abstract theories of meaning.<sup>34</sup>

# John Dewey's Rejoinder to Philosophy in American Education

Dewey considered the work of the APA authors to be out of touch with the contemporary situation in U.S. higher education. He laments the work of the APA's committee, their regional meetings which largely excluded pragmatic thinkers, and the irrelevance of what passes for higher education in philosophy. His response to the APA's report, is *The Problems of Men*, a collection of essays written, with one exception, between 1935 and 1945, that touch upon the issues raised by the APA committee's report. His introduction, "*The Problems of Men* and the Present State of Philosophy," sets out his ideas concerning the report. The title of his collection, *Problems of Men*, comes from Dewey's "The Democratic Faith and Education," an essay that an APA author quoted to allude to pragmatic philosophy. Dewey believed the subject matter of philosophy taught in colleges and universities were only of "slight importance" to the public. He argues, "the philosophical tenets that are presented in the Report cling largely,

although not exclusively, to the view that the primary aim of philosophy is knowledge of Being or 'Reality.''<sup>37</sup> This creates a dualism between the religious and scientific, the absolute and the relative, and between the pure and the tentative basis of knowledge and truth. Dewey advocates for the use of science and the scientific method to search for wisdom and to enable social change and the "search for the ends and values that give direction to our collective human activities."<sup>38</sup> The danger of absolutist thinking is that it leads to the disparagement of all other thought, resulting in fanatical beliefs "too absolute to be subject to doubt and inquiry."<sup>39</sup> He writes

Not "relativity" but absolutism isolates and confines. The reason, at bottom, that absolutism levels its guns against relativity in a caricature is that search for the connection of events is the sure way of destroying the privileged position of exemption from inquiry which every form of absolutism secures wherever it obtains.<sup>40</sup>

The "need," writes Dewey,

...is that there be now the kind of systematic and comprehensive criticism of current methods and habits and the same projection of generous hypotheses as, only a few hundred years ago, set going the revolution in physical knowledge...to make evident the social conditions—economic, political, moral, and religious—which have restricted scientific inquiry.<sup>41</sup>

Breaking down the separation between the utilitarian and the liberal is, for Dewey, a necessity. Such "dualism," he writes,

...is a further projection of pre-scientific, pre-technological, pre-democratic conditions into present philosophy in a way so obstructive as to demand total obliteration.... The belief that "vocational" education cannot be humane is an illustration that would be humorous were it not so disastrous in effect.<sup>42</sup>

Dewey describes the tone of the APA report as elitist and undemocratic, arguing that the absolutist, idealist, and metaphysical bases for philosophy and for education are rooted in historical epochs that should have been left in the past. Social and economic conditions dictated "citizens" had the advantage of a "liberal" education, while the lower classes had vocational learning only to facilitate their servitude. Those ancient and medieval ideas about the menial and the free and ideal, the vocational and the liberal, persist. The APA authors advocate a heavily liberal, literary, arts-based system of higher education. Dewey writes,

They propose we turn our face to the medievalism in which socalled "liberal" arts were identified with literary arts: a course natural to adopt in an age innocent of knowledge of nature, an age in which the literary arts were the readiest means of rising above barbarism through acquaintance with the achievements of Greek–Roman culture.<sup>43</sup>

Professional and vocational studies were to be separated into schools focused on specialized content and skills. Such elitist, anti-science, and anti-technological thoughts were, to Dewey, a danger to democracy. The "successful maintenance of democracy," writes Dewey,

...demands the utmost in use of the best available methods to procure a social knowledge that is reasonably commensurate with our physical knowledge, ...[that] applications of intelligence in a multitude of fields to a vast diversity of problems so that science and technology may be rendered servants of the democratic hope and faith. 44

While the APA authors argue the under-classes do not deserve democracy, Dewey counters,

...even if he is not literate or sophisticated in other respects, the idea of democracy as opposed to any conception of aristocracy is that every individual must be consulted in such a way, actively not passively, that he himself becomes a part of the process of authority, of the process of social control; that his needs and wants have a chance to be registered in a way where they count in determining social policy.<sup>45</sup>

Dewey posits that "asking other people what they would like, what they need, what their ideas are, is an essential part of the democratic idea." A primary function of the school as a social institution is the preparation for democratic participation in a free society. In *Freedom and Culture* (1940), Dewey warns that democracy and democratic institutions are not self-sustaining. The society and its institutions are responsible for the maintenance of democratic, non-authoritarian, totalitarian, and personality cult ideals. To Dewey tolerance was an insufficient goal for a pluralistic society. He queries,

What are our schools doing positively and aggressively and constructively to cultivate understanding and goodwill which are essential to democratic society? What are we doing to translate those great ideas of liberty and justice out of a formal ceremonial ritual into the realities of the understanding, the insight and the genuine loyalty of the boys and girls in our schools?"<sup>48</sup>

# Alexander Meiklejohn and Liberal Education

Alexander Meiklejohn, proponent of liberal arts education, professor of philosophy and Dean at Brown, former President of Amherst, former Director of the University of Wisconsin experimental college, and founder of the San Francisco School for Social Studies also found fault with *Philosophy in American Education*. While at Brown, Meiklejohn wrote that

"the aim of the American college...is to open up the riches of human experience, of literature, of nature, of art, of religion, of philosophy, of human relations, social, economic, political, to arouse an understanding and appreciation of these...the arousing of interests."49 Philosophy would serve as an aspect of such a liberal arts education, the focus being the cultivation of intelligence. In 1922. as President of Amherst, Meiklejohn began an undergraduate Course of Study in Social and Economic Institutions, exploring U.S. civilization and "making minds." The Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin begun by Meiklejohn in the Fall semester of 1927 was a two-year liberal-arts-based curriculum with study of Ancient Greece as the first year, and the study of contemporary America in the second, requiring extensive reading of primary-source books, discussion, and reflective writing. Meiklejohn described it as "a college run without classrooms, lectures, or text books; founded on a theory of education the purpose of which is to find and to teach a new way of life."51 The San Francisco School for Social Studies begun in 1934 was a network of adult education groups meeting at various sites in San Francisco and Sonoma County.<sup>52</sup> As a liberal educator and theorist, Meiklejohn had no peer.

Joining Dewey, with whom he disagreed on almost everything, he claims the APA authors missed the mark by focusing too much on the institution of education and neglecting the role of philosophy in broader society. But where Dewey focused upon the practical application of philosophy and the lack of relevance, the absolutist focus of college philosophy courses, Meiklejohn considers the segregation of philosophic study from the unified study of society and social conditions. He especially considers the importance of philosophy as a substitute for the decreasing importance of religion in matters of values and ethics. Meiklejohn was especially unimpressed with Section III, "The Teaching of Philosophy—Things That Can Be Done," which discusses the current teaching of philosophy. He writes, "one cannot help wishing that this part of the book had not been written. The evidence presented by the commission strongly suggests that the time has come for radical revolution in the philosophy of liberal education." <sup>53</sup>

Without offering an alternative, the report authors allow the discussion to become focused on methods without considering the basic question of its "aims and proper content." Meiklejohn notes that "representatives were called upon to make recommendations. But the only basic agreement accepted by all of them is that, as a working group, they have no joint recommendations to make." Instead of coming to some kind of consensus on the condition of philosophy and the study of philosophy in the U.S., each author speaks for himself and, even worse, provides a "false analysis of the significance of 'differences' in philosophy." This has a disastrous effect on educational planning such that

...liberal education in the United States can have no concerted understanding of what it is doing? ... [I]f it be true that a commission of philosophers, chosen for the specific purpose, can make no plans for the cultivation of the national intelligence, then it follows that no one can do it.<sup>57</sup>

Where the authors found the lack of agreement among teachers on the basic issues to be a detriment to creating meaningful curricula, Meiklejohn sees lack of agreement as a strength. He asks, "What is the evidence that teachers who differ on 'fundamental issues' are, for that reason, unable to cooperate in the making of a common plan of teaching?," responding that,

...on the level of common sense, the inference here involved seems invalid. The disagreements of minds engaged in "the rational pursuit of truth" are not impediments to the thinking out of a liberal curriculum. On the contrary, those differences make cooperation in teaching both necessary and possible.... If there are "fundamental issues" about which intelligent men disagree, then all intelligent men must learn to think about them. The cultivation of such thinking is, essentially, the content of a liberal education.<sup>58</sup>

Meiklejohn finds three basic principles in education he argues must be taken into consideration: 1. The fragmentation of knowledge, 2. The lack of a required curriculum, and 3. The inclusion of all students in the goal of a liberal education. Problems arising from these principles include a lack of liberal education among the current faculties, an avoidance of teaching that he calls "the principles and the practice of freedom and social responsibility," and a lack of exposure of all students to liberal teaching and liberal learning, which is, for Meiklejohn, "higher in the democratic sense in which common responsibilities are more significant than are special interests." Ultimately, Meiklejohn wishes the authors and the philosophers they represent to lead in the exploration of the development of the liberal college, to "become, as they should be, the intellectual guardians of our national life." If not, philosophers become unimportant to anyone but themselves.

### **Dewey and Meiklejohn**

As president of the APA in 1925, Meiklejohn spoke of the philosopher's task to be a source of wisdom only to accuse his colleagues of having retreated into the "temple" to devote themselves to focus upon their own ends. He posits the philosopher is responsible for decisions on what should be taught in an objective and disinterested way: honestly to describe the world as he sees it. He warns philosophers "not [to] allow their own proper work to fall into other hands or into no hands at all." Meiklejohn stresses that modern, industrial societies that focus on industrial efficiency and intellectual pursuits are subsumed by their endeavors. Philosophy is,

for Meiklejohn, inwardly directed towards self-understanding. To have an impact teaching and thinking must be structured around their consequences and life values must be a goal. Meiklejohn finds philosophy to be a thing apart from other disciplines, yet focused upon the wider world,

...a great community of minds through which that understanding has run from end to end, binding men together by knowledge of each other, by knowledge of the common faith, the common circumstance, the common goal, amid the differences of individual taste and interest and value.<sup>63</sup>

He considers the most urgent duty of philosophers as clarifying that plan for human living we call democracy.

Meiklejohn, whose interests were in higher education and adult education, finds report authors too focused on the place of teaching philosophy instead of on the broader question of a liberal educational institution's educational philosophy. He reminds authors and, by extension, APA members that Kant requires scholars be well-rounded, conversant in mathematics, the sciences, and metaphysics, and allows that "they," writes Meiklejohn,

...have not examined the philosophical principles which underlie all genuine educational planning. They have not asked how educational judgments are possible. They give no criteria for separating, in this field, the true from the false. In a word, their study [though they are philosophers] is not philosophic.<sup>64</sup>

He reminds them of Comenius' statement that "if we find the education of pupils faulty, the most probable explanation of that fact lies in the faulty education of those by whom the teaching is done." Unless and until we have a clear philosophy of liberal education our efforts will come up wanting.

Dewey focuses upon education in creating citizens with the attributes necessary for democracy, prosperity, and social understanding. He finds no reason to divide the scholarly and learned professions from trade and service occupations, finding such a separation a legacy from the historical class structure and a denial of democracy.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, the individual is responsible for determining what they want, what their needs and troubles are. Individuals in a democracy become an important component of authority. As social conditions change, Dewey writes,

...the problem of maintaining a democracy becomes new, and the burden that is put upon the school, upon the educational system is not that of stating merely the ideas of the men who made this country, their hopes and their intentions, but of teaching what a democratic society means under existing conditions.<sup>67</sup>

For Dewey the primary goal of education is to find ways to promote richness and fullness of the democratic way of life and progressive education was the institution to accomplish such a goal.

Dewey, who focuses more on common education, sees the APA attack along three fronts: first an attack on Pragmatism and science, then an attack on schools, and, finally, an attack on democracy. For Dewey the chief problems of philosophy stem from the variety of ways knowledge is conditioned. Experience is, for the absolutists, an insufficient basis for knowledge. They establish, Dewey writes, "conditions of knowing set up before knowing can take place."68 But Dewey regards such ideas as dated since, "the applications of science in life by inventions and technological arts have been going on at such a rate that the alleged problem of its foundations and possibility of knowledge are of but remote professional concern."69 APA report authors long for a return to the past's liberal education which divided the liberal from the utilitarian, the scholarly from the vocational, and the abstract from the practical. Calling upon schools to return to the linguistic, literary, and metaphysical would, in essence, creates a dual social institution of education. Dewey simply observes that "The belief that 'vocational' education cannot be humane is an illustration that would be humorous were it not so disastrous in effect."70 Finally, Dewey establishes the idea that the meaning of liberal has changed. Where once it was confining, now it becomes liberating. For Dewey,

To define liberal as that which liberates is to bring the problem of liberal education and of the liberal arts college within the domain of an inquiry in which the issue is settled by search for what is actually accomplished. The test and justification of claims put forth is found in observable consequences, not in a priori dogma.<sup>71</sup>

In the final analysis, science and technology must be integrated into the linguistic, literary, and metaphysical studies, the liberal arts, so that they "may be rendered servants of the democratic hope and faith." The schools (for Dewey), the colleges and universities (for APA), or adult education (for Meiklejohn) can provide such education. However, a dualistic view of education—liberal arts education on the one hand and education for professions, vocations, and self-fulfillment on the other—is simply not acceptable as a model for education in a democracy. The APA's report eventually fell victim to history. The GI Bill of 1944 made colleges and universities accessible to returning service-men and -women. Higher education institutions were then required to reconsider their mission in relation to the needs of their expanding student body.

### **Endnotes**

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- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 138–139.
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- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 111.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 105.
- <sup>24</sup> Murphy, "The Situation in American Philosophy," 52.
- William James, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," University Chronicle 1, no. 4 (1898): 287–310, 291.
- Murphy, "The Situation in American Philosophy," 53. The projected integration of philosophy with life seems now to require a further integration of the resulting philosophy of life with philosophy as an intellectual discipline. Until this has been achieved, it cannot justly be called the "recovery of philosophy."
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- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 50.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
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- 65 Ibid., 692.
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- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 41.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 6.
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