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Irony Compounded

There is irony in the circumstance that the present overhauling of American education is being led in good part by the sciences, for one of the thinkers whose work helped produce the view of education under attack, John Dewey, was himself much influenced by science, and this influence is reflected in his educational doctrines. To simplify a complex matter, the change sought is from a learner-centered curriculum, favored by many professional educators, toward a subject-centered curriculum, favored by lay critics of education. In the effort at overhaul, Dewey has sometimes been taken as the symbol of what is wrong with education, but at least some of the readers of his views on science would find this symbol poorly chosen.

Dewey was one of the most prolific of writers, but certain key ideas run through much of what he wrote. He saw science as *the* method of finding things out. In his interpretation of science, he was at pains to elaborate the view that scientific inquiry does not begin with the gathering of data. Rather it begins with a problem, a conflict, a difficulty. The problem suggests a possible solution, or hypothesis, and it is this hypothesis that guides the gathering of data. The data then serve to prove or disprove the hypothesis, and to solve or leave unresolved the problem. Such, very briefly, was Dewey's vision of science, a vision reflected in his educational doctrines. He was opposed to authoritarianism and believed in inculcating an experimental attitude in students. Emphasis in education was to be on method, on solving problems.

At the same time, Dewey's interpretation of science has been the subject of some criticism by scientifically oriented thinkers. Another theme running through much of his work, motivated perhaps by his great concern with social and moral matters, is his attack on "dualisms," such as the one he saw existing between theory and practice, between intelligence and conduct. This attack, so the criticism runs, has resulted in a view of science in which scientific problems arise too immediately out of practical problems, and in which the solution to scientific problems is tied too closely to the solution of practical problems. According to the critics, not all distinctions are "dualisms," and the truth of the matter is that scientific activity is related to a much wider universe than the one we meet in daily life. Astronomy is a bigger subject than navigation.

This misinterpretation of science introduces a second note of irony in the bearing of Dewey's thought on present educational tendencies. If we are to be guided in education by the values of science, and if science does make reference to this wider universe, then, so the criticism concludes, education must find a place for disinterested curiosity and understanding. Education should foster a love of subject matter for its own sake. True, the occurrence of a storm can be used in the classroom to initiate a discussion of climatic conditions in the United States, but pedagogy so conceived has its limits.

Two wrongs, of course, do not make a right, nor does irony compounded cancel itself out. A moral is suggested, however. If some of the partisans of a subject-centered curriculum too readily take Dewey as the philosopher of all they oppose, then some of our professional educators are equally hasty when they make Dewey into a philosopher who is above reproach.—J.T.