

CULTIVATING THE
SAPIENTIST: DEMOCRACY,
EDUCATION AND THE
POSSIBILITIES OF
PRAGMATISM

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Volume 5 · Number 2 · 2021 · Pages 293 - 305

The Global Crisis in Democracy

Warning against the division between natural science and humanities, and the narrow professionalization of academic disciplines, in *Democracy and Education* Dewey writes as follows:

[Education] should aim not at keeping science as a study of nature apart from literature as a record of human interest, but at cross-fertilizing both the natural sciences and the various human disciplines such as history, literature, economics, and politics. (Dewey 1980, pp. 294-295)

Today in the 21st century, we are confronted with issues that threaten the future of the earth and humankind – issues involving nuclear weapons and nuclear power, environment degradation, poverty and exploitation, ethnic and religious tensions, and nationalism. To aggravate the situation, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the world. The crisis calls for a non-divisive, holistic

conception of human being. Under these circumstances science faces the need to reconsider its mission in the light of the world as a whole. In solving global problems, science should join hands with the humanities and, more than ever, it needs to develop an ethical perspective on how we should live. This is at the heart of the task that liberal education and democracy must address today. And this is the very question that John Dewey struggled with in the early 20th century. *How can philosophers, scientists, humanities and social science scholars, and educators at all levels respond to the crisis in liberal democracy?* In response, I shall try to explore the contemporary significance of Dewey's pragmatism in the light of its integrative approach to science and humanities, taking the cultivation of scholars as the task of democracy and education.

The Scientist and Integrated Thinking

The Japanese researcher, Shuntaro Ito (1930 --), a scholar of a history of science and civilization studies, warned against the division between science and ethics, and he called for an ethics for science (Ito 2013, p. 24). Moral

questions involving how we should live are not, he argued, the monopoly of professional philosophy and ethics: research must begin with the empirical evidence, drawing in such scientific knowledge as neuroscience, physiological anthropology and animal behavioral studies. The scientist should not be trapped in their narrow field as a member of professional groups separated from ethics, but should become a *sapientist* (pp, 18, 177-178):

Scio, the origin of the word, “science,” refers to mere knowledge. What is important is not mere knowledge, but *sapio*, being wise. The scientist (the person of knowledge) should be the sapientist (the person of wisdom) who can think about what goes beyond knowledge, about how to use it and about its influence. (p. 178, my translation)

The sapientist is the kind of scholar that is called for today for an integrative approach to global problems. It is along this line of thinking that we can pursue the contemporary significance of Dewey’s pragmatism.

Dewey proposed the scientific method of thinking – the procedure of practical judgment in a particular situation based upon the consequences of one’s conduct. This is not the positivist notion of science as value-neutral but the idea of an experimental method of inquiry based upon the procedures of hypothesis, observation, and control, and a critical habit of mind. Through scientific method, Dewey claimed, humans could reach the facts and laws of nature (Dewey 1981, p. 11); it is an avenue for “effective moral renewal (Dewey 1920, xxxvii). As Hilary Putnam characterizes this way of thinking, Dewey rejects the fact/value dichotomy (Putnam 1994, p. 205), and his philosophy is featured by an entanglement of facts and values (Putnam 2012, p. 48). Furthermore, inquiry, including scientific inquiry, is “cooperative human interaction” to address real problems in human life (Putnam 1995, pp. 70, 71). This is a “democratization of inquiry” (p. 73). Dewey introduced “a *normative* notion of science” (p. 72): “good science requires respect for autonomy, symmetric reciprocity and discourse ethics” (pp. 72-73). Hence,

Dewey's scientific method is inseparable from his idea of democracy as a way of living.

It is with this rich and broad view of science that Dewey argues for the continuum of science and the humanities:

A morals based on study of human nature instead of upon disregard for it would find the facts of man continuous with those of the rest of nature and would thereby ally ethics with physics and biology. It would find the nature and activities of one person conterminous with those of other human beings, and therefore links ethics with the study of history, sociology, law and economics.

(Dewey 1983, p. 11)

Dewey indicates here the vision of integrative knowledge. Even within science, there is "continuous cross-fertilization between astronomy, physics, chemistry and the biological sciences" (Dewey 1984, p. 342). From this integrative stance, Dewey was critical of any narrowly technical view of science. "When we say that a subject of science is technically

specialized, or that it is highly 'abstract,' what we practically mean is that it is not conceived in terms of its bearing upon human life" (Dewey 1984, pp. 342-343). He is also critical of the separation of pure science and applied science: "Science is converted into knowledge in its honorable and emphatic sense *only* in application. Otherwise it is truncated, blind, distorted" (Dewey 1984, p. 344). What Dewey envisions here is a *human (and humane) science* – science that is based upon the view of the human being as an integrative, holistic being. Integrity and the idea of whole in Dewey's pragmatism have the following implications. First, based upon his anti-foundationalist view of growth, the idea of the whole is not static or closed. Rather it is an idea of integrity being pursued, characterized by growth without fixed end. This is a vision of perfectionism without final perfectibility. Second, in Dewey's pragmatism, being integrative means that one is always already public, living in the continuum of the private and the public. The scientist who is involved in cooperative inquiry and democratization of inquiry is situated in the public realm and contributing to the public. Conversely, the public should be enlightened and informed

about science. Third, a scientist inspired by Dewey's pragmatism is a human being guided by a sense of ethical mission. They bridge science and ethics, the humanities and the natural sciences. With all these implications, this scientist is a sapientist.

Democracy, Education and the Cultivation of the *Sapientist*

Any study so pursued that it increases concern for the values of life, any study producing greater sensitiveness to social well-being and greater ability to promote that well-being is humane study. (Dewey 1980, p. 297)

So says Dewey. What then is the task of democracy and education, and what is the role of the university today? What kinds of collaborative projects, in research or teaching, within and beyond academia, might address the crisis? In response, I would like to propose four directions. First, the university is to be a place for cultivating sapientists. This is to rethink the university as an institution that cultivates a scientific outlook based on an integrative

world-view. Second, as a means of achieving this, trans-disciplinary dialogue is to be envisioned – a kind of dialogue beyond the interdisciplinary as it involves interaction between people from diverse fields within and without academia. This might go beyond what Dewey envisioned in bridging natural science and the humanities in the sense that this leads to the field of integrative studies. In such fields, philosophers and physicists, scholars and doctors, university professors and business managers, and scientists and religious practitioners are to be engaged in dialogue. This might be called what Ken Wilber called “integral transformative practice” (Wilber 1996). The university then will be a research institute and laboratory for integrative studies. Through trans-disciplinary dialogue, the existing narrow frameworks of academic disciplines will be destabilized, and participants will undergo transformation and mutual growth. Third, this trans-disciplinary studies will lead to the cultivation of scholars who will transverse the boundaries of specialized fields, bridging science and ethics with philosophical insight, and being engaged in integrating human science and natural science. They will

have the broad scope and challenging spirit to transcend the barriers of academic disciplines. They will also be scholars with an empirical and practical perspective on how to solve the problems in the world – instead of being engaged in speculative and abstract thinking in self-enclosed fields isolated from ongoing events in life. In this way the university will become a site of education where sapientists in collaboration address the question of how humankind as a whole will evolve. This can lay the way for a public ethics (Ito 2013a, p. 86), beyond individualistic ethics.¹

A fourth point is that, as Dewey envisioned, the university will open bridges to the outside world. Dewey writes: “the inquiry which alone can furnish knowledge as a precondition of public judgments must be contemporary and quotidian” (Dewey 1984, p. 348). If so, the division between the public and scientific specialist must be overcome. The university here plays the role of the institution that develops a critical public. It can serve as a medium through which scientists and citizens, academics and non-academics share specialized knowledge, and it can

enable collaboration between specialists and the public at large.

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