

Abstract:

It is difficult to find just one place to look for children and childhood in the American philosopher John Dewey's work. This is not because he uses the terms so often, but because the concept of childhood pervades his opus in and through another set of terms—development, growth, experience, plasticity, habit, impulse, and education. In Dewey's language, none of these terms mean quite what they mean in other thinkers' language, and especially not in the language of the human development theorists of the early twentieth century and after, who based their thinking on a monological, unidirectional developmental trajectory that could be applied at all levels of the evolutionary continuum. Dewey is an interactionist through and through, and thus all his terms should be understood as dialectical. He does not invoke the concept "child" without invoking the concept "adult," nor does he describe anything that does not have a normative dimension, which by definition belies "pure" description. His is a language of possibility, and the limits of human possibility are incalculable. This is why the concept of childhood is so important in his work. In this text we present selections from two works, the first emerging at the sickening epicenter of the Great War, in 1916—a war in which youth was sacrificed to what he calls adult "infantilisms" on a historically unprecedented scale, and a war that, arguably, effectively suppressed the educational possibilities his work represents for the rest of the century. *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan) is his magnum opus on education, and characteristically both garrulous and brilliantly pointed, maddeningly oblique and trenchantly critical, painfully dull and fitfully enthralling, explicitly conservative and implicitly radical. The next selections are from *Human Nature and Conduct* (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press), published in 1922, when the orgiastic death-feast of the tyrants, the politicians, and their hosts of blind acolytes was (temporarily) over.

Key words: childhood, education, children

John Dewey sobre as Crianças, Infância, e Educação

Resumo:

É difícil encontrar um único lugar para procurar sobre crianças e infância na obra do filósofo americano John Dewey. Não é porque ele usa os termos com tanta frequência, mas porque o conceito de infância permeia sua obra através de um outro conjunto de termos — desenvolvimento, crescimento, experiência, plasticidade, impulso, e educação. Na linguagem de Dewey, nenhum desses termos significa exatamente o que significa na linguagem de outros pensadores, e especialmente não na linguagem dos teóricos do desenvolvimento humano do começo do século vinte e posteriores, que basearam seus pensamentos numa trajetória de desenvolvimento monológica e unidirecional que poderia ser aplicada em todos os níveis do contínuo evolucionário. Dewey é um interacionista em toda sua extensão, e por isso todos os seus termos devem ser entendidos como dialéticos. Ele não invoca o conceito "infância" sem invocar o conceito "adulto", nem descreve nada que não tenha uma dimensão normativa, que por definição desdiz a "pura" descrição. Sua linguagem é de pura

possibilidade, e os limites das possibilidades humanas são incalculáveis. É por isso que o conceito de infância é tão importante em sua obra. Neste texto apresentamos seleções de dois trabalhos, o primeiro emergindo no epicentro doentio da Grande Guerra, em 1916 – uma guerra na qual a juventude foi sacrificada ao que ele chamou de “infantilismos” dos adultos em uma escala historicamente sem precedentes, e uma guerra que, pode-se argumentar, suprimiu efetivamente as possibilidades educacionais que o seu trabalho representa para o resto do século. *Democracia e educação*, (Macmillian, New York) é sua obra prima em educação, e caracteristicamente ao mesmo tempo tagarela e brilhantemente afiada, enlouquecedoramente oblíqua e incisivamente crítica, penosamente sombria e perfeitamente cativante, explicitamente conservativa e implicitamente radical. As seleções seguintes são de *Natureza Humana e conduta* (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press), publicada em 1922, quando a orgiástica festa de morte dos tiranos, dos políticos, e suas cortes de cegos acólitos estava (temporariamente) terminada.

Palavras-chave: infância, educação, crianças

John Dewey sobre los Niños, Infancia y Educación

Resumen:

Es difícil encontrar un único lugar sobre niños e infancia en la obra del filósofo americano John Dewey. No lo es porque use los términos con tanta frecuencia, sino porque el concepto de infancia penetra su obra a través de otro conjunto de términos – desenvolvimiento, crecimiento, experiencia, plasticidad, impulso, y educación. En el lenguaje de Dewey, ninguno de estos términos significa exactamente lo que significa en el lenguaje de otros pensadores, y especialmente diferente del lenguaje de los teóricos del desenvolvimiento humano del comienzo del siglo veinte y posteriores, que basaron sus pensamientos en una trayectoria de desenvolvimiento monológica y unidireccional que pudiera ser aplicada en todos los niveles del continuo evolucionario. Dewey es un interaccionista en toda su extensión, y por esto todos sus términos deben ser entendidos como dialécticos. No invoca el concepto “infancia” sin invocar el concepto “adulto”, ni describe nada que no tenga una dimensión normativa, que por definición desdice la “pura” descripción. Su lenguaje es de pura posibilidad, y los límites de las posibilidades humanas son incalculables. Es por esto que el concepto de infancia es tan importante en su obra. En este texto presentamos selecciones de textos de dos trabajos, el primero emerge en el epicentro insalubre de la Gran Guerra, en 1916 – una guerra en que la juventud fue sacrificada a lo que llamó de “infantilismos” de los adultos en una escala históricamente sin precedentes, y una guerra que, se puede argumentar, suprimió efectivamente las posibilidades educacionales que su trabajo representa para el resto del siglo. *Democracia y educación*, (Macmillian, New York) es su obra prima en educación, y característicamente al mismo tiempo habladora y brillantemente afilada, enloquecedoramente oblicua e incisivamente crítica, penosamente sombría y perfectamente cautivadora, explícitamente conservadora e implícitamente radical. Las selecciones que siguen son de *Naturaleza humana y conducta* (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press), publicada en 1922, cuando la orgiástica fiesta de muerte de los tiranos, los políticos, y sus cortes de ciegos acólitos estaba (temporariamente) terminada.

Palabras clave: infancia, educación, niños



JOHN DEWEY ON CHILDREN, CHILDHOOD, AND EDUCATION

David Kennedy

It is difficult to find just one place to look for children and childhood in the American philosopher John Dewey's work. This is not because he uses the terms so often, but because the concept of childhood pervades his opus in and through another set of terms—development, growth, experience, plasticity, habit, impulse, and education. In Dewey's language, none of these terms mean quite what they mean in other thinkers' language, and especially not in the language of the human development theorists of the early twentieth century and after, who based their thinking on a monological, unidirectional developmental trajectory that could be applied at all levels of the evolutionary continuum. Dewey is an interactionist through and through, and thus all his terms should be understood as dialectical. He does not invoke the concept "child" without invoking the concept "adult," nor does he describe anything that does not have a normative dimension, which by definition belies "pure" description. His is a language of possibility, and the limits of human possibility are incalculable. This is why the concept of childhood is so important in his work.

Like his contemporary Freud—but perhaps more radically because he invokes education as reconstruction while Freud only knows education as resignation—Dewey breaks down the dividing line between child and adult. Since "life is development, and . . . developing, growing, is life," both adult and child are under the same law. The developmental sclerosis of adults and the scandalously imperfect culture they compulsively maintain is a historical situation, which means it could be different. And the calculus of that difference in fact resides just in the way adults relate to the children who are in their power—that is, in education.

For Dewey, education is the cultural location where the human capacity for reconstruction can either be facilitated or suppressed. This makes of education a political location as well—profoundly political because it is about cultural politics and the politics of subjectivity. Dewey is scandalized that adults use children’s greatest power—which he calls “plasticity”—to render them weak, to construct the docile body, to, in his words, subject them to “an impatient, premature mechanization of impulsive activity after the fixed pattern of adult habits of thought and affection”—in short, to violate the possibility represented by the one unique characteristic of the human species—what he calls “prolonged infancy,” or neoteny. This violation of the young represents for him the very nexus of cultural repression, and the point of blockage of the possibility for peace and justice in the human domain. As such, for Dewey, the possibilities offered by education are the possibilities offered the species, and thus the school becomes in his thinking an institution upon which the greatest stakes converge. He may have been naïve, or made a colossal category mistake; that is, it could be that the school merely follows and reproduces, rather than initiates, deep cultural change. But whether he is right or wrong about that, his insight into fundamental importance of the adult-child relation for the possibility of cultural transformation remains.

What follows are selections from two works, the first emerging at the sickening epicenter of the Great War, in 1916—a war in which youth was sacrificed to what he calls adult “infantilisms” on a historically unprecedented scale, and a war that, arguably, effectively suppressed the educational possibilities his work represents for the rest of the century. *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan) is his magnum opus on education, and characteristically both garrulous and brilliantly pointed, maddeningly oblique and trenchantly critical, painfully dull and fitfully enthralling, explicitly conservative and implicitly radical.

The next selections are from *Human Nature and Conduct* (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press), published in 1922, when the orgiastic death-feast of the tyrants, the politicians, and their hosts of blind acolytes was



(temporarily) over. Here he is concerned both to understand what allows such an extraordinary combination of greed and cruelty to dominate human affairs on such a broad level, and to find the way out, which for Dewey is always the way forward. Not surprisingly, that way leads through childhood—but not just through childhood; rather, through that encounter between adults and children called education in which both are transformed, and through which “a future new society of changed purposes and desires may be created by a deliberate humane treatment of the impulses of youth.” His terms of use in this work—impulse and habit, desire and reason, conformity and skepticism, constriction and experiment, plasticity and rigidity, docility and coercion, stagnation and renewal, transformation and regulation, deliberation and discovery, reproduction and reconstruction—comprise a clear lexicon of liberatory thought. Here his voice is clear—insistent even—while still modulated with the sort of gentility which is not just a generational marker, but an index of his loyalty to the possibilities inherent in the human condition, and with the humility which is, somehow, deeply a part of his genius.

From *Democracy and Education* (pp. 41-53, passim)

The primary condition of growth is immaturity. This may seem to be a mere truism—saying that a being can develop only in some point in which he is undeveloped. But the prefix “im” of the word immaturity means something positive, not a mere void or lack. It is noteworthy that the terms “capacity” and “potentiality” have a double meaning, one sense being negative, the other positive. Capacity may denote mere receptivity, like the capacity of a quart measure. We may mean by potentiality a merely dormant or quiescent state—a capacity to become something different under external influences. But we also mean by capacity an ability, a power; and by potentiality potency, force. Now when we say that immaturity means the possibility of growth, we are not referring to absence of powers which may exist at a later time; we express a force positively present—the *ability* to develop.

Our tendency to take immaturity as mere lack, and growth as something which fills up the gap between the immature and the mature, is due to regarding childhood *comparatively* instead of intrinsically. We treat it simply as a privation because we are measuring it by adulthood as a fixed standard. This fixes attention upon what the child has not, and will not have till he becomes a man. This comparative standpoint is legitimate enough for some purposes, but if we make it final, the question arises whether we are not guilty of an overweening presumption. Children, if they could express themselves articulately and sincerely, would tell a different tale; and there is excellent adult authority for the conviction that for certain moral and intellectual purposes adults must become as little children.

The seriousness of the assumption of the negative quality of the possibilities of immaturity is apparent when we reflect that it sets up as an ideal and standard a static end. The fulfillment of growing is taken to mean an accomplished growth: that is to say, an Ungrowth, something which is no longer growing. The futility of the assumption is seen in the fact that every adult resents the imputation of having no further possibilities of growth; and so far as he finds that they are closed to him mourns the fact as evidence of loss, instead of falling back on the achieved as adequate manifestation of power. Why an unequal measure for child and man?

Taken absolutely, instead of comparatively, immaturity designates a positive force or ability—the *power* to grow. We do not have to draw out or educe positive activities from a child, as some educational doctrines would have it. Where there is life, there are already eager and impassioned activities. Growth is not something that is done to them; it is something they do. The positive and constructive aspect of possibility gives the key to understanding the two chief traits of immaturity, dependence and plasticity. (1) It sounds absurd to hear dependence spoken of as something positive, still more absurd as a power. Yet if helplessness were all there were in dependence, no development could ever take place. A merely impotent being has to be carried, forever, by others. The fact that dependence is accompanied by growth in



ability, not by an ever increasing lapse into parasitism, suggest that it is already something constructive. Being merely sheltered by others would not promote growth. For (2) it would only build a wall around impotence. With reference to the physical world, the child is helpless. He lacks at birth and for a long time thereafter power to make his way physically, to make his own living. If he had to do that by himself, he would hardly survive an hour. On this side his helplessness is almost complete. The young of the brutes are immeasurably his superiors. He is physically weak and not able to turn the strength which he possesses to coping with the physical environment.

1. The thoroughgoing character of this helplessness suggests, however, some compensating power. The relative ability of the young of brute animals to adapt themselves fairly well to physical conditions from an early period suggests the fact that their life is not intimately bound up with the life of those about them. They are compelled, so to speak, to have physical gifts because they are lacking in social gifts. Human infants, on the other hand, can get along with physical incapacity just because of their social capacity. We sometimes talk and think as if they simply happened to be *physically* in a social environment, as if social forces exclusively existed in the adults who take care of them, they being passive recipients. If it were said that children are themselves marvelously endowed with *power* to enlist the cooperative attention of others, this would be thought to be a backhanded way of saying that others are marvelously attentive to the needs of children. But observation shows that children are gifted with an equipment of the first order for social intercourse. Few grown-up persons retain all of the flexible and sensitive ability of children to vibrate sympathetically with the attitudes and doings of those about them. Inattention to physical things (going with incapacity to control them) is accompanied by a corresponding intensification of interest and attention as to the doings of people. The native mechanism of the child and his impulses all tend to facile social responsiveness. The statement that children, before adolescence, are egotistically self-centered, even if it were true, would not contradict the truth of this statement. It would simply indicate that their social

responsiveness is employed on their own behalf, not that it does not exist. But the statement is not true as matter of fact. The facts which are cited in support of the alleged pure egoism of children really show the intensity and directness with which they go to their mark. If the ends which form the mark seem narrow and selfish to adults, it is only because adults (by means of a similar engrossment in their day) have mastered these ends, which have consequently ceased to interest them. Most of the remainder of children's alleged native egoism is simply an egoism which runs counter to an adult's egoism. To a grown-up person who is too absorbed in his own affairs to take an interest in children's affairs, children doubtless seem unreasonably engrossed in *their* own affairs.

From a social standpoint, dependence denotes a power rather than a weakness; it involves interdependence. There is always a danger that increased personal independence will decrease the social capacity of an individual. In making him more self-reliant, it may make him more self-sufficient; it may lead to aloofness and indifference. It often makes an individual so insensitive in his relations to others as to develop an illusion of being really able to stand and act alone – an unnamed form of insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remediable suffering of the world.

2. The specific adaptability of an immature creature for growth constitutes his *plasticity*. This is something quite different from the plasticity of putty or wax. It is not a capacity to take on change of form in accord with external pressure. It lies near the pliable elasticity by which some persons take on the color of their surrounding while retaining their own bent. But it is something deeper than this. It is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to modify actions on the basis of the results of prior experience, the power to *develop dispositions*. Without it, the acquisition of habits is impossible.



It is a familiar fact that the young of the higher animals, and especially the human young, have to *learn* to utilize their instinctive reactions. The human being is born with a greater number of instinctive tendencies than other animals. But the instincts of the lower animals perfect themselves for appropriate action at an early period after birth, while most of those of the human infants are of little account just as they stand. An original specialized power of adjustment secures immediate efficiency, but, like a railway ticket, it is good for one route only. A being who, in order to use his eyes, ears, hands, and legs, has to experiment in making varied combinations of their reactions, achieves a control that is flexible and varied. A chick, for example, pecks accurately at a bit of food in a few hours after hatching. This means that definite coordinations of activities of the eyes in seeing and of the body and head in striking are perfected in a few trials. An infant requires about six months to be able to gauge with approximate accuracy the action in reaching which will coordinate with his visual activities; to be able, that is, to tell whether he can reach a seen object and just how to execute the reaching. As a result, the chick is limited by the relative perfection of its original endowment. The infant has the advantage of the *multitude* of instinctive tentative reactions and of the experiences that accompany them, even though he is at a temporary disadvantage because they cross one another. In learning an action, instead of having it given readymade, one of necessity learns to vary its factors, to make varied combinations of them, according to change of circumstances. A possibility of continuing progress is opened up by the fact that in learning one act, methods are developed good for use in other situations. Still more important is the fact that the human being acquires a habit of learning. He learns to learn.

The importance for human life of the two facts of dependence and variable control has been summed up in the doctrine of the significance of prolonged infancy. This prolongation is significant from the standpoint of the adult members of the group as well as from that of the young. The presence of dependent and learning beings is a stimulus to nurture and affection. The need

for constant continued care was probably a chief means in transforming temporary cohabitations into permanent unions. It certainly was a chief influence in forming habits of affectionate and sympathetic watchfulness; that constructive interest in the well-being of others which is essential to associated life. Intellectually, this moral development meant the introduction of many new objects of attention; it stimulated foresight and planning for the future. Thus there is a reciprocal influence. Increasing complexity of social life requires a longer period of infancy in which to acquire the needed powers; this prolongation of dependence means prolongation of plasticity, or power of acquiring variable and novel modes of control. Hence it provides a further push to social progress.

We have already noted that plasticity is the capacity to retain and carry over from prior experience factors which modify subsequent activities. This signifies the capacity to develop habits, or develop definite dispositions. . . . [T]he acquiring of habits is due to an original plasticity of our natures: to our ability to vary our responses till we find an appropriate and efficient way of acting. Routine habits, and habits that possess us instead of our possessing them, are habits which put an end to plasticity. They mark the close of power to vary. There can be no doubt of the tendency of organic plasticity, of the physiological basis, to lessen with growing years. The instinctively mobile and eagerly varying action of childhood, the love of new stimuli and new developments, too easily passes into a "settling down," which means aversion to change and a resting on past achievements. Only an environment which secures the full use of intelligence in the process of forming habits can counteract this tendency. Of course, the same hardening of the organic conditions affects the physiological structures which are involved in thinking. But this fact only indicates the need of persistent care to see to it that the function of intelligence is invoked to its maximum possibility. The short-sighted method which falls back on mechanical routine and repetition to secure external efficiency of habit, motor skill without accompanying thought, marks a deliberate closing in of surrounding upon growth.



. . . life is development, and . . . developing, growing, is life. . . . The child has specific powers; to ignore that fact is to stunt or distort the organs upon which his growth depends. The adult uses his powers to transform his environment, thereby occasioning new stimuli which redirect his powers and keep them developing. Ignoring this fact means arrested development, a passive accommodation. Normal child and normal adult alike, in other words, are engaged in growing. The difference between them is not the difference between growth and no growth, but between the modes of growth appropriate to different conditions. With respect to the development of powers devoted to coping with specific scientific and economic problems, we may say the child should be growing in manhood. With respect to sympathetic curiosity, unbiased responsiveness, and openness of mind, we may say that the adult should be growing in childlikeness. One statement is as true as the other.

Three ideas which have been criticized, namely, the merely privative nature of immaturity, static adjustment to a fixed environment, and rigidity of habit, are all connected with a false idea of growth or development,—that it is a movement toward a fixed goal. Growth is regarded as *having* an end, instead of *being* an end. The educational counterparts of the three fallacious ideas are first, failure to take account of the instinctive or native powers of the young; secondly, failure to develop initiative in coping with novel situations; thirdly, an undue emphasis upon drill and other devices which secure automatic skill at the expense of personal perception. In all cases, the adult environment is accepted as a standard for the child. He is to be brought up *to* it.

Natural instincts are either disregarded or treated as nuisances—as obnoxious traits to be suppressed, or all events to be brought into conformity with external standards. Since conformity is the aim, what is distinctively individual in a young person is brushed aside, or regarded as a source of mischief or anarchy. Conformity is made equivalent to uniformity. Consequently, there are induced lack of interest in the novel, aversion to progress, and dread of the uncertain and the unknown. Since the end of growth is outside of and beyond the process of growing, external agents have to

be resorted to to induce movement toward it. Whenever a method of education is stigmatized as mechanical, we may be sure that external pressure is brought to bear to reach an external end.

. . . education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age. We first look with impatience upon immaturity, regarding it as something to be got over as rapidly as possible. Then the adult formed by such educative methods looks back with impatient regret upon childhood and youth as a scene of lost opportunities and wasted powers. This ironical situation will endure till it is recognized that living has its own intrinsic quality and that the business of education is with that quality.

Realization that life is growth protects us from that so-called idealizing of childhood which in effect is nothing but lazy indulgence. Life is not to be identified with every superficial act and interest. Even though it is not always easy to tell whether what appears to be mere surface fooling is a sign of some nascent as yet untrained power, we must remember that manifestations are not to be accepted as ends in themselves. They are signs of possible growth. They are to be turned into means of development, of carrying power forward, not indulged or cultivated for their own sake. Excessive attention to surface phenomena (even in the way of rebuke as well as encouragement) may lead to their fixation and thus to arrested development. What impulses are moving toward, not what they have been, is the important thing for parent and teacher. The true principal of respect for immaturity cannot be better put than in the words of Emerson: "Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude. But I hear the outcry which replies to this suggestion: Would you verily throw up the reins of public and private discipline; would you leave the young child to the mad career of his own passions and whimsies, and call this anarchy a respect for the child's nature? I answer, — Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself. . . . The two points in a boy's training are, to keep his *naturel* and train off all but that; to keep his *natural*, but stop off his uproar, fooling, and horseplay; keep his nature *and arm*



it with knowledge in the very direction in which it points." And as Emerson goes on to show this reverence for childhood and youth instead of opening up an easy and easy-going path to the instructors, "involves at once, immense claims on the time, the thought, on the life of the teacher. It requires time, use, insight, event, all the great lessons and assistances of God; and only to think of using it implies character and profoundness."

Summary. Power to grow depends upon need for others and plasticity. Both of these conditions are at their height in childhood and youth. Plasticity or the power to learn from experience means the formation of habits. Habits give control over the environment, power to utilize it for human purposes. Habits take the form both of habituation, or a general and persistent balance of organic activities with surroundings, and of active capacities to readjust activities to meet new conditions. The former furnishes the background of growth; the latter constitute growing. Active habits involve thought, invention, and initiative in apply capacities to new aims. They are opposed to routine which marks an arrest of growth. Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself. The criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact.

From *Human Nature and Conduct*, pp. 46-89, passim

. . . we return to our special problem, which is how the rigid character of past custom has unfavorably influenced beliefs, emotions and purposes having to do with morals.

We come back to the fact that individuals begin their career as infants. For the plasticity of the young presents a temptation to those having greater experience and hence greater power which they rarely resist. It seems putty to be molded according to current designs. That plasticity also means power to change prevailing customs is ignored. Docility is looked upon not as ability to learn whatever the world has to teach, but as subjection to those instructions of others which reflect *their* current habits. To be truly docile is to be eager to

learn all the lessons of active, inquiring, expanding experience. The inert, stupid quality of current customs perverts learning into a willingness to follow where others point the way, into conformity, constriction, surrender of skepticism and experiment. When we think of the docility of the young we first think of the stocks of information adults wish to impose and the ways of acting they want to reproduce. Then we think of the insolent coercions, the insinuating briberies, the pedagogic solemnities by which the freshness of youth can be faded and its vivid curiosities dulled. Education becomes the art of taking advantage of the helplessness of the young: the forming of habits becomes a guarantee for the maintenance of hedges of custom.

. . . . In a definite sense, then, human society is always starting afresh. It is always in the process of renewing, and it endures only because of renewal. We speak of the peoples of southern Europe as Latin peoples. Their existing languages depart widely from one another and from the Latin mother tongue. Yet there never was a day when this alteration of speech was intentional or explicit. Persons always meant to reproduce the speech they heard from their elders and supposed they were succeeding. This fact may stand as a kind of symbol of the reconstruction wrought in habits because of the fact that they can be transmitted and be made to endure only through the medium of the crude activities of the young, or through contact with persons having different habits.

For the most part, this continual alteration has been unconscious and unintended. Immature, undeveloped activity has succeeded in modifying adult organized activity accidentally and surreptitiously. But with the dawn of the idea of progressive betterment and an interest in new uses of impulses, there has grown up some consciousness of the extent to what a future new society of changed purposes and desires may be created by a deliberate humane treatment of the impulses of youth. This is the meaning of education; for a truly human education consists in an intelligent direction of native activities in the light of the possibilities and necessities of the social situation. But for the most part, adults have given training rather than education. An impatient, premature mechanization of impulsive activity after the fixed pattern of adult



habits of thought and affection has been desired. The combined effect of love of power, timidity in the face of the novel and a self-admiring complacency has been too strong to permit immature impulse to exercise its reorganizing potentialities. The younger generation has hardly even knocked frankly at the door of adult customs, much less been invited in to rectify through better education the brutalities and inequities of established adult habits. Each new generation has crept blindly and furtively through such chance gaps as have happened to be left open. Otherwise it has modeled after the old.

We have already noted how original plasticity is warped and docility is taken mean advantage of. It has been used to signify not capacity to learn liberally and generously, but willingness to learn the customs of adult associates, ability to learn just those special things which those having over and authority wish to teach. Original modifiability has not been given a fair chance to act as a trustee for a better human life. It has been loaded with convention, biased by adult convenience. It has been practically rendered into an equivalent of non-assertion of originality, a pliant accommodation to the embodied opinions of others.

Consequently docility has been identified with imitateness, instead of with power to re-make old habits, to re-create. Plasticity and originality have been opposed to each other. That the most precious part of plasticity consists in ability to form habits of independent judgment and of inventive initiation has been ignored. For it demands a more complete and intense docility to form flexible easily re-adjusted habits than it does to acquire those which rigidly copy the ways of others. In short, among the native activities of the young are some that work towards accommodation, assimilation, reproduction, and others that work toward exploration, discovery and creation. But the weight of adult custom has been thrown upon retaining and strengthening tendencies toward conformity, and against those which make for variation and independence. The habits of the growing person are jealously kept within the limit of adult customs. The delightful originality of the child is tamed.

Worship of institutions and personages themselves lacking in imaginative foresight, versatile observation and liberal thought, is enforced.

Very early in life sets of mind are formed without attentive thought, and these sets persist and control the mature mind. The child learns to avoid the shock and unpleasant disagreement, to find the easy way out, to appear to conform to customs which are wholly mysterious to him in order to get his own way—that is to display some natural impulse without exciting the unfavorable notice of those in authority. Adults distrust the intelligence which a child has while making upon him demands for a kind of conduct that requires a high order of intelligence, if it is to be intelligent at all. The inconsistency is reconciled by instilling in him “moral” habits which have a maximum of emotional impressments and adamant hold with a minimum of understanding. These habitudes, deeply ingrained before thought is awake and even before the day of experiences which can later be recalled, govern conscious later thoughts. They are usually deepest and most un-get-at-able just where critical thought is most needed—in morals, religion, and politics. These “infantilisms” account for the mass of irrationalities which prevail among men of otherwise rational tastes. These personal “hang-overs” are the cause of what the student of culture calls survivals. But unfortunately these survivals are much more numerous and pervasive than the anthropologist and historian are wont to admit. To list them would perhaps oust one from “respectable” society.

And yet the intimation never wholly deserts us that there is in the unformed activities of childhood and youth the possibilities of a better life for the community as well as for individuals here and there. This dim sense is the ground of our abiding idealization of childhood. For with all its extravagancies and uncertainties, its effusions and reticences, it remains a standing proof of a life wherein growth is normal not an anomaly, activity a delight not a task, and where habit-forming is an expansion of power not its shrinkage. Habit and impulse may war with each other, but it is a combat between the habits of adults and the impulses of the young, and not, as with the adult, a civil warfare whereby personality is rent asunder. Our usual measure for the “goodness” of



children is the amount of trouble they make for grownups, which means of course the amount they deviate from adult habits and expectations. Yet by way of expiation we envy children their love of new experiences, their intentness in extracting the last drop of significance from each new situation, their vital seriousness in things that to us are outworn.

We compensate for the harshness and monotony of our present insistence upon formed habits by imagining a future heaven in which we too shall respond freshly and generously to each incident of life. In consequence of our divided attitude, our ideals are self-contradictory. On the one hand, we dream of an attained perfection, an ultimate static goal, in which effort shall cease, and desire and execution be once and for all in complete equilibrium. We wish for a character which shall be steadfast, and we then conceive this desired faithfulness as something immutable, a character exactly the same yesterday, today and forever. But we also have a sneaking sympathy for the courage of an Emerson in declaring that consistency should be thrown to the winds when it stands between us and the opportunities of present life. We reach out to the opposite extreme of our ideal of fixity, and under the guise of a return to nature dream of a romantic freedom, in which *all* life is plastic to impulse, a continual source of improvised spontaneities and novel inspirations. We rebel against all organization and stability. If modern thought and sentiment is to escape from this division in its ideas, it must be through utilizing released impulse as an agent of steady reorganization of custom and institutions.

While childhood is the conspicuous proof of the renewing of habit rendered possible by impulse, the latter never wholly ceases to play its refreshing role in adult life. If it did, life would petrify, society stagnate. Instinctive reactions are sometimes too intense to be woven into a smooth pattern of habits. Under ordinary circumstances they appear to be tamed to obey their master, custom. But extraordinary crises release them and they show by wild violent energy how superficial is the control of routine. The saying that civilization is only skin deep, that a savage persists beneath the clothes of a civilized man, is the common acknowledgment of this fact. At critical moments

of unusual stimuli the emotional outbreak and rush of instincts dominating all activity show how superficial is the modification which a rigid habit has been able to effect.

When we face this fact in its general significance, we confront one of the ominous aspects of the history of man. We realize how little the progress of man has been the product of intelligent guidance, how largely it has been a by-product of accidental upheavals, even though by an apologetic interest in behalf of some privileged institution we later transmute chance into providence. We have depended upon the clash of war, the stress of revolution, the emergence of heroic individuals, the impact of migrations generated by war and famine, the incoming of barbarians, to change established institutions. Instead of constantly utilizing unused impulse to effect continuous reconstruction, we have waited till an accumulation of stresses suddenly breaks through the dikes of custom.

It is often supposed that as old persons die, so must old peoples. There are many facts in history to support the belief. Decadence and degeneration seems to be the rule as age increases. An irruption of some uncivilized horde has then provided new blood and fresh life—so much so that history has been defined as a process of rebarbarization. In truth the analogy between a person and a nation with respect to senescence and death is defective. A nation is always renewed by death of its old constituents and the birth of those who are as young and fresh as ever were any individuals in the hey-day of the nation's glory. Not the nation but its customs get old. Its institutions petrify into rigidity; there is social arterial sclerosis. Then some people not overburdened with elaborate and stiff habits take up and carry on the moving process of life. The stock of fresh peoples is, however, approaching exhaustion. It is not safe to rely upon this expensive method of renewing civilization. We need to discover how to rejuvenate it from within. A normal perpetuation becomes a fact in the degree in which impulse is released and habit is plastic to the transforming touch of impulse. When customs are flexible and youth is education as youth and not premature adulthood, no nation grows old.



. . . . There are possibilities resident in the education of the young which have never yet been taken advantage of. . . . [T]hus far schooling has been largely utilized as a convenient tool of the existing nationalistic and economic regimes. Hence it is easy to point out defects and perversions in every existing school system. It is easy for a critic to ridicule the religious devotion to education which has characterized for example the American republic. It is easy to represent it as a zeal without knowledge, fanatical faith apart from understanding. And yet the cold fact of the situation is that the chief means of continuous, graded, economical improvement and social rectification lies in utilizing the opportunities of educating the young to modify prevailing types of thought and desire.

Recebido em: 14/10/2005
Aprovado em: 13/11/2005