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EDUCATION, DEMOCRACY, AND CAPITALISM*

Philip Kitcher

Columbia University

Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and, for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class.

John Dewey[1]

I

Dewey bequeathed to us a conception of philosophy quite different from the one most prominent in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. Philosophy begins with study of the good life, aims to understand how opportunities for living well can be promoted by social institutions, and considers how young people, people with their lives before them, can best be prepared, as individuals and as citizens. Instead of taking metaphysics, epistemology and the study of mind and language as core philosophical disciplines, Dewey's rival vision would see Plato, Rousseau, and Mill as large figures in a great tradition that focuses on questions of human and social development. In adopting that vision, we should add Dewey to the list, and embrace his explicit judgment that philosophy can be defined as the general theory of education.[2]

I want to explore some basic questions that arise in developing an approach to education within our liberal democratic tradition. I'll start with Mill, whose varied thoughts on human and social development offer a number of approaches to the aims of education that are apparently in tension with one another. Then I'll try to show how Dewey develops some Millian themes in ways that are intended to reconcile the tensions. The result is an ambitious ideal for education that faces the obvious challenge

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1 John Dewey *Democracy and Education* 192. I shall refer to this work as DE.

2 DE 328. I shall indicate briefly at the very end of this essay why I endorse Dewey's vision of philosophy. More extensive defenses are suggested in several essays that are currently forthcoming: "Mill, Education, and the Good Life", "Carnap and the Caterpillar", and, most centrally, "The Road Not Taken".

that it's economically unfeasible. Dewey saw the challenge, and offered sketches of a response to it. I hope to make clear how deep and difficult the problem is.

II

First, we need a framework for discussion. An obvious way to characterize education would be to suggest that it provides young people with knowledge. That suggestion, however, is dangerous unless we adopt a broad conception of knowledge, one that embraces both certain kinds of practical abilities and the cognitive skills involved in extending knowledge once formal education is done. Whether or not a particular set of moral precepts ought to be inculcated in schools and universities, it's surely correct to judge that any system of education that routinely produced people incapable of reflective ethical decisions or of participating in reasoned exchanges with their fellow-citizens would be, in virtue of that failure, inadequate. Similarly, too, an educational system that left its former students incapable of continuing to learn more, as human knowledge increases, would be recognizably unsatisfactory.[3]

We can thus divide the kinds of knowledge we expect good education to generate into three main types: knowledge of particular propositions that have been explicitly taught, habits and dispositions to judge and to act in private and in social contexts, and skills to acquire further knowledge of the first two types. Despite the great emphasis often placed on the first type of knowledge, one might view it as less important than the second, and take the third to be really fundamental.

The project of education explicitly recognizes the importance for each of us of the knowledge we acquire from others, and even the most superficial reflections on it reveal the overwhelming importance of public knowledge. What passes for the contemporary theory of knowledge is often focused on arcane puzzles about how *individuals* can be justified, but the dominant source of most of what anyone knows is our system of public knowledge. Nor is public knowledge adequately understood by assimilating our encounters with it to mundane cases of testimony. The student's interaction with the teacher is significantly different from your fleeting encounter with a stranger on the street from whom you request directions. The teacher's role is that of a conduit between the system of public knowledge and young people who, as yet, are uninitiated into the riches of that system.[4] Questions about authority with respect to

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[3] Dewey emphasizes the importance of "learning to learn" (DE 45, 51). He also thinks of the moral aspects of education in terms of the acquisition of methods of ethical deliberation. See *Moral Principles in Education* (MPE) 3.

[4] This formulation should not be read as supposing a one-way flow from the society's acquired wisdom to the passive initiate. I follow Dewey in thinking of education as a vehicle for reproducing, and modifying, the ideas of the background culture. See, for example, DE 75; I'll develop this theme more extensively below.

the information transmitted in the classroom are not primarily questions about the credentials of teachers (such issues arise, but they are relatively straightforward), but about the status of the system of public knowledge itself. To understand the ways in which the educational project can be conceived, and how there can arise attractive conceptions of that project that are in tension with one another, it is useful to begin with the conception of a system of public knowledge.

Here's an obvious analogy. A society's system of public knowledge is like a gigantic library in which new documents are constantly deposited, and from which the citizens can withdraw as much as they want, whenever they want it. Education both acquaints young members of the society with those parts of the library's contents on which the previous generation places particular emphasis, and also equips neophytes with the ability to seek out and understand the information they need. The contents of the library are built up in a society-wide collective project. Inquiries are directed towards those issues that seem, at the time when they are conducted, most pertinent to the needs of the citizens. The results of those inquiries are registered on the books if they meet standards of certification designed to balance the competing claims of providing as much information as possible and insuring accuracy: notice that the society will, tacitly or explicitly, have to arrive at a trade-off here. The organization of the information provided is intended to dovetail with the ways in which young people are equipped with the skills for using the public resource. Ideally, the inquiries conducted should anticipate the questions to which citizens will need answers, the results of those inquiries should be maximally informative with minimal risk of misinformation, and the educational system should enable the citizens to discover, with no significant extra work, the answers they need.[5]

There are important philosophical questions about the character of current systems for public knowledge, questions that have been neglected in contemporary epistemology. Prominent among them are issues about how the agenda for inquiry should reflect the concerns of citizens, and about how to decide on standards of certification when citizens are committed to radically different ideas about good evidence.[6] Here, however, I'm concerned with the question of how the conception of education as setting up a connection between future citizens and a public system of knowledge gives rise to alternative visions of the aims of education.

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[5] For two centuries or more, the systems of public knowledge of affluent societies have been so vast that selection, both in inquiry, and in transmission, is inevitable. Dewey's discussions clearly appreciate the importance of this: see DE 187, 191, 286-7. In the context of inquiry, the necessity of selection, together with even a relatively modest democratic ideal leads to a demand for what I've called "Well-ordered science"; see *Science, Truth, and Democracy* chapter 10. For a more extensive discussion of this demand in connection with the idea of public knowledge, see *Science in a Democratic Society* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2011).

[6] I discuss some of these questions in *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and more extensively in *Science in a Democratic Society*.

III

Although John Stuart Mill doesn't offer as extensive an account of the ends of education as we find in other writers, his wide-ranging essays on aspects of social theory provide important suggestions about how education should be understood.[7] An obvious Millian perspective would start from *On Liberty*, where Mill offers the picture of people ideally choosing for themselves their own plan of life, deciding what matters to them, what they are to pursue and how they are to pursue it. For Mill, the decision to shape your life in one way rather than another ought to be neither coerced nor blind. Provided that decisions made within the legally protected private sphere do not harm those outside it, the decisions should be free of external interference. The negative imperative – "No interference with the private choices of mature citizens!" – is accompanied by a positive directive. Young people who would not initially be able to make responsible decisions about what matters in their own lives are to be brought to the point at which they can seriously contemplate what projects and pursuits make most sense for them. A central task of their education is to enable them to decide on "their own good" and "their own way", basing their decision on a reflective understanding of themselves and of the genuine options that arise for them. Mill's emphasis on "experiments of living" derives from his thought that the reports of such experiments are essential contributions to human public knowledge. Over time, the menu of choices for new human beings increases, and it's important that education should give the young a clear idea of the range of possibilities. By itself, however, that's hardly enough, and equally crucial is the inculcation of abilities for reflective decision-making, just those ethical habits of mind to which I've already briefly alluded.

An obvious worry about this first ideal is that it overemphasizes the individual in isolation from others. Elsewhere, however, Mill proposes that a principal task of education lies in preparing people for the role of citizen in a democracy, conceiving of this in terms of an ability to make informed and reasoned decisions about matters of public policy.[8] In societies with extensive division of labor, as well as stratification by socio-economic class, there's likely to be a form of myopia in public decision-making: citizens cannot understand the needs and concerns of their fellows, and cannot even

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[7] Mill's most direct treatment of educational issues occurs in the Inaugural Address he delivered on his appointment as Rector of St. Andrews University (reprinted in Volume 21 of Mill's Collected Works). That address articulates all the perspectives I'll attribute to Mill. I discuss it in more detail in "Mill, Education, and the Good Life". John Skorupski has independently come to a similar reading of Mill; see his *Why Read Mill Today?*(London: Routledge, 2006) especially chapters 1 and 2.

[8] This perspective is most evident in *Considerations on Representative Government.* However, it's notable that that work also stresses the educative role of democracy itself, a theme that is readily interpreted in terms of the richer conception of democracy favored by Dewey.

fathom their own interests.[9] A crucial argument for the superiority of laissez-faire capitalism loses its cogency because a fundamental premise becomes dubious – we may no longer trust that the individual citizens are the best judges of the impact of proposed courses of action on their own lives. At a minimum, then, the task of education is to correct for this myopia, by enabling people to gain accurate information about the large issues that confront them. To this end they need an ability to recognize the likely consequences of proposed policies, not only for themselves, but also for others. Further, they need to develop a capacity for identifying the predicaments of their fellow-citizens and for responding sympathetically to those predicaments. Once again, the development of such skills appears to presuppose a lengthy period of broad education, during which people are taught to analyze the effects of complicated interventions in a variety of areas, during which they also become acquainted with the very different ways in which their fellow citizens live

Mill's analyses, however, aren't simply directed towards the *status quo*. He plainly believes that public knowledge is a great achievement of our predecessors, one on which we can build. At some moments in human history – for example in the wake of the fall of Roman civilization in western Europe – simply securing and retaining what had already been accomplished seemed a crucial project for scholars and for the society that supported them, but, for us one task of education is to identify and then train people who can continue expanding our knowledge, people whose contributions will become available to all our descendants. An obvious way to pursue this goal, manifested in the British educational policies under which I grew up, is to test and winnow, starting at whatever age educational psychologists see as the first point at which reliable markers can be spotted.[10]

Finally, there's a progressivist notion, clearly articulated by Mill, that envisages stages in human culture. The famous declaration of *On Liberty* that liberty is to be conceived in terms of "the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" rests on Mill's view that considerations of the good are dependent on the stage to which a society has developed – thus, there are circumstances in which the appropriate approach to the good is Bentham's hedonic utilitarianism (perhaps the circumstances of the early Industrial Revolution provide a case in point). As people attain higher levels of culture, the measures previously applied come to appear crude and inadequate. In

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[9] *Considerations on Representative Government* (in *On Liberty* and other essays, Oxford University Press [World's Classics] 1998) 252-6, 296-301.

[10] Of course, part of the British policy depended on studies, allegedly carried out by Sir Cyril Burt, that were said to reveal the stability of measurements of intelligence taken at age ten. Those studies turned out to be fraudulent. For a penetrating critique see the work of Leon Kamin (beautifully summarized in R.C. Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon Kamin *Not in our Genes*, New York: Pantheon, 1984). I've given my own assessment of the ethical status of Burt's research in the introductory chapter of *Vaulting Ambition* (Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 1985).

the educational context, the aim of fostering flourishing human lives in the here-and-now sits beside the aim of creating a culture in which later beings will be able to attain to a style of flourishing that is beyond our current imaginings. So there's yet another perspective on education, one that takes its principal task to be that of producing people who can continue the progression of human culture.

Four perspectives are surely enough. Education might promote individual flourishing, or it might aim at the production of citizens who will participate well in current democratic institutions, or it might endeavor to expand public knowledge, or, finally, it might foster the advance of human culture. These are all attractive ideals, but it's not obvious that they can be reconciled: how do you promote individualism, citizenship, the advancement of knowledge and the progressive development of human culture all at once?

IV

One way of reading *Democracy and Education* is to see Dewey as understanding what is attractive about the Millian ideals and recasting them so that they can be harmonized with one another. Dewey explicitly claims to be able to reconcile goals that we might think of as incompatible: "… if we analyzed more carefully the respective meanings of culture and utility, we might find it easier to construct a course of study which should be useful and liberal at the same time."[11] His reconciliation project can be interpreted as encompassing the four Millian perspectives I've distinguished.

For, in the first instance, Dewey contends that the Millian account of individual flourishing is doubly wrong: it starts by confining a single individual within a private, protected, sphere and it supposes some critical moment at which this individual freely chooses a life-plan. Meaningful life, on Dewey's account, is committed, from the beginning, to joint activity, so that the isolated individual within the private sphere is a harmful fiction, one that should give way to overlapping, protected spheres in which clusters of individuals can cooperate. He insists, repeatedly, that social activity must be a constituent of any significant individual choice: "Any individual has missed his calling, farmer, physician, teacher, student, who does not find that the accomplishments of results of value to others is an accompaniment of a process of experience inherently worth while. Why then should it be thought that one must take his choice between sacrificing himself to doing useful things for others, or sacrificing them to pursuit of his own exclusive ends … ?"[12] Moreover, we should see our lives not as proceeding according to some fixed plan on which we decide at some crucial time – the "defining

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[11] DE 258.

[12] DE 122. See also DE 37, 93, 120-1. A more general recasting of Mill's themes about individual liberty and protected spheres is provided in the first chapter of *The Public and its Problems* (PP).

moment" – but as following a trajectory that is constantly adapted to circumstances, and, most importantly, to the lives of others: "… education is a constant reorganizing or restructuring of experience".[13] Both points are subsumed under the idea that our lives go better through our awareness of connections among aspects of our experiences, or, as Dewey so often puts it, through the expansion and deepening of "meanings". Increased awareness enables forms of appreciation that matter intrinsically to us, and also promote interventions that help us realize antecedent goals (as well as sometimes prompting us to change our aims).[14]

This reframing of Millian ideals is to be understood in terms of a conception of democracy richer than that espoused by Mill. Dewey rightly sees the process of voting as a superficial manifestation of democracy, and envisages a broader process of social discussion through which people are brought to something like consensus.[15] Tocqueville's celebration of the New England town meeting lurks in the background.[16] Central to Dewey's thought is the conception of supplementing the methods for resolving factual disputes developed from the early seventeenth century on with an equally powerful method for addressing conflicts over values. From our twenty-first century perspective, the thought that we possess a socially-shared means of settling factual disputes already seems optimistic, not because contemporary theoretical critiques have exposed the inefficacy of the rules and standards that are employed in the sciences (broadly construed), in social and historical studies, in critical disciplines, in the law, and in everyday life, but because the recognized difficulty of squaring those rules and standards with prominent religious conceptions fosters an *epistemological* fragmentation of the public.[17] Dewey extends the claim that secular standards govern the societal acceptance of facts to the ambitious thought that conflicts in values can be decided through the detailed elaboration of the consequences of various options by people who are maximally sympathetic to the predicaments of all.[18]

Democracy, in Dewey's conception, involves the joint working through of the problems that arise at a given stage of society and culture, by people committed to the improvement of that society and that culture. The knowledge they ideally acquire in their education prepares them for understanding the connections within experience, whether centered on natural or social phenomena, gives them methods for pursuing

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13 DE 76. The entire passage DE 76-9 wraps together Dewey's breakdown of the boundaries between the school and life, and between the school and society. He supposes both that education isn't preparation for some period in which its rewards will be reaped, and that education is constitutive of the ways in which we live until our cognitive-social lives end. Similar themes are sounded at many other places in his writings: see DE 20-1, 311; MPE 25; *The School and Society* (SS) 9, 10.

14 DE 75, 85, 120-1; SS 16.

15 See DE 87, 122, 359. Also PP 147.

16 As in the case of Mill, Tocqueville's analysis of democracy in America is important for Dewey.

17 I develop this point in *Science in a Democratic Society*.

18 I offer this reconstruction of Dewey's approach to value conflict in "The Hall of Mirrors" (Chapter 14).

further inquiry and addressing value conflicts, and simultaneously develops them as individuals and as citizens, since any meaningful trajectory for a life will be one that involves joint action, and, indeed, joint efforts to improve the culture. For Dewey, I suggest, individual flourishing is bound up with democratic participation, with contributing to and learning from public knowledge, and playing a role in that progress of human life emphasized by Mill.[19] If there are particular places at which Millian tensions resurface, then those are to be seen as particular value conflicts, to be tackled in their context by means of the methods assembled by public knowledge and transmitted in the system of education.

A central task for a post-Deweyan theory of education is to articulate more clearly, and in more detail, the attempt at reconciliation I've just sketched. But I want now to turn to a different difficulty that arises for an approach to education along these lines, and perhaps for any descendant of Mill's liberal ideals. This problem, of which Dewey was well aware[20], derives from the fact that, as the aims of education become more ambitious (as they surely do on Dewey's account) there are serious questions about their socio-economic feasibility. I'm going to approach it by distilling a line of argument from the first great theorist of capitalism.

V

Adam Smith begins *The Wealth of Nations* by developing further a conception of human society that's already present in his predecessors, and even in Plato.[21] The production of goods by a society will be enhanced by assigning different roles to different people; (Plato's account seems to make the optimistic assumption that this can achieve maximal efficiency in a distribution that accords with the native talents of each). Smith's guiding thought is that further efficiencies in production arise from decomposing the tasks to be performed ever more finely, so that each worker who participates in the process exercises an extremely specialized skill. With hindsight, it's easy to attribute to Smith the idea that economic growth, measured by the production of value, is driven by a double motor, in which technological innovations divide and streamline the tasks of production processes and in which individual workers are trained to become especially attuned to discharging their assigned task in optimal time.

Over 800 pages later, however, Smith turns his attention to education, and is almost driven to an unnerving reversal of his initial perspective. In accordance with the emphasis on training workers for their practical tasks, he opposes what he takes to

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19 I discuss Mill's commitment to the progress of forms of human life in "Mill's Consequentialism", forthcoming in the *Routledge Companion to Nineteenth Century Thought*.

20 See, for example, DE 85, 86, 119, 122, 251-2.

21 See the discussion of the formation of city-states in Book II of the *Republic*.

be a wasteful form of education, one that has survived into his time as a relic of outmoded ideas. Although he recognizes that young men in the ancient world were drawn to a course of education whose guiding ideal is that of individual flourishing, his judgment is that the eighteenth-century programs that advertise themselves as aiming at this ideal are (at best) frivolous and useless luxuries for a tiny elite. They would no longer be sustained if the original conditions of ancient education were still in force, and teachers had to live on the fees of their pupils.

> A private teacher could never find his account in teaching, either an exploded and antiquated system of a science acknowledged to be useful, or a science universally believed to be a mere useless and pedantic heap of sophistry and nonsense.[22]

Smith proposes simultaneously to construct a system of public education that will be supported by the contributions of students (or, more exactly, by their parents) and to reform the curriculum so that it is geared to the needs of the commercial world: the "essential parts of education", delivering the abilities to "read, write, and account" are to be preserved, and the useless "smattering of Latin" is to give way to "the elementary parts of geometry and mechanics".[23] Allegedly, study of these latter subjects will be valuable in the improvement of the common trades that most students will eventually practice.[24]

The trouble is that the intensification of the division of labor seems to tell *against* the idea of the system of education Smith envisages. If the guiding criterion for training the young is to equip them for the work they will carry out as adults, it's far from obvious that they'll need "the elementary parts of geometry and mechanics", or very much skill in reading and writing. It might be efficient to select a few especially talented young people whose applications of mathematical sciences to common trades or production processes would improve efficiency, but the vast majority of the young would seem to be able to manage with an extremely basic education.[25] Smith recognizes the plight of the ordinary worker as the division of labor becomes ever more minute:

> … the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few

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[22] *Wealth of Nations* 838 (Modern Library, 2000).

[23] *Wealth of Nations* 842, 843.

[24] There are, I think, some difficulties in reconciling Smith's thought that schools be supported by the contributions of parents with his conception of the curriculum. The assumption that people will perceive it to be in the interest of their children to study just these things – and not, rather, to acquire either something more minimal or the useless badges that mark out the socially superior – is open to debate. But my interest here lies in a different aspect of Smith's tangled views on education.

[25] For Dewey's opposition to this educational approach, see MPE 24-5, DE 289, 318.

> simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.[26]

Now one might think that the "torpor" that Smith attributes to the ordinary worker results from the neglect of aspects of his education that would develop him as a human being. Precisely because the focus on efficiency in production has neglected the ideals advanced by Mill and consolidated by Dewey, the life of the worker is truly empty. Smith might be right to think that the memory of tags from Virgil would be of little value as the laborer stretches the umpteenth wire to form the umpteenth pin, but it's not obvious that reflection on the elementary parts of geometry and mechanics will serve better. Hence, the Smithian focus on education appears to acquiesce in the thought that mental death is simply the lot of most people under capitalism.[27]

It's tempting to suppose that the predicament Smith envisages is tied to a very specific form of early industrial capitalism, and that the problem goes away under the conditions of contemporary employment. That, however, would be to mistake the general form of the concern. On the one hand we have an educational ideal of the type proposed by Mill and Dewey, one that emphasizes non-economic facets of individual and social development. On the other is the social strategy of assigning workers to roles in the cause of advancing net productivity. Assignments of this latter kind may embody far more flexibility than that recognized in Smith's analysis of a competent and efficient workforce – they may attend to the fact that workers may need to be able to change jobs and may require social skills for interacting with others. Yet even when that is recognized, it's still reasonable to worry that an efficient education for producing the needed workforce would pay no attention to major aspects of the Mill-Dewey ideal. It's not enough to build in *some type of* flexibility and socialization; it has to be the specific kinds of flexibility and social commitment that Mill and Dewey value. Hence, it's no adequate response to the Smithian worry to point out that most contemporary workers aren't in analogous situations to the toilers in the pin factory: although the workplace environment has changed, it's far from obvious that the alterations resolve the threat to human development.[28]

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[26] *Wealth of Nations* 840. Smith's diagnosis here comes very close to that offered by Marx in "Alienated Labor". The three "economic and philosophical manuscripts" that precede Marx's celebrated discussion, are, in essence, Marx's own précis of Smith, and the opening sentence – "We have begun from the premises of political economy …" – is completely justified. As I'll suggest in the text, Smith's own response to the diagnosis is quite inadequate, and it's tempting to envisage his having recognized that and rewritten the entire *Wealth of Nations*!

[27] Dewey explicitly notes the problem of the alienation of the worker: DE 205, 260, 314, 317.

[28] I shall elaborate this point below. I introduce it here to forestall the misunderstanding that Smith's argument is linked to a very specific form of economic life.

In fact, these passages in the *Wealth of Nations* are especially interesting for us, because they contain the germ of a serious skeptical argument about a program like Dewey's. Stepping back from Smith's formulations, and from the details of the context in which he wrote, there are several important ideas.

A. Economic well-being requires a continued intensification of the division of labor.

B. That intensification of the division of labor requires workers who are trained to highly specialized tasks.

C. A system of education that invests in programs guided by other ideals – in particular Dewey's ambitious package (or even its Millian elements) – will be less efficient at training workers for the highly specialized tasks they will be required to perform.

D. Efficient systems of education will produce workers, most of whose lives will be impoverished.

Smith offers us very specific versions of A-D, versions that are articulated with respect to his eighteenth-century pre-industrial context. I shall shortly try to show that there are also versions that seem quite plausible in our twenty-first century, post-industrial context. But, before doing so, it's worth making the underlying threat explicit. For it appears that A-C support a conclusion to the effect that societies which invest in systems of education that aim at Dewey's preferred goals will lose out in economic competition to societies that adopt more efficient systems of education. If that is so, Deweyan education can only be a temporary luxury, something a society can enjoy for a few generations before it loses the economic basis on which its inefficient system can be supported. The next task is to investigate whether this threat is genuine.

VI

Here's a very concrete version of the worry I derive from Smith. Suppose education is conceived in Dewey's way, so that a substantial part of educating children is devoted to preparing for joint social activity and to laying the basis for a broad appreciation of the varieties of human culture and cultures. Contrast this with a rival system that embodies Smith's emphasis on what is useful in the workplace. In this rival system, students with particular aptitudes for the disciplines that underlie contemporary economic life are identified as early as possible, and rigorously trained so that they arrive at the frontiers of the pertinent fields as soon as possible. Smithian students become workers who are either (i) more adept at discharging the tasks required by the most productive existing technologies, or (ii) better able to improve those technologies, or (iii) able to function equally well, for a longer time or at lower

costs, as those trained by the system that lavishes time on Deweyan education (because of earlier induction into the workforce. Whichever of these advantages accrues to the Smithian rival, the society that implements it will do better in terms of its productivity, and its greater success in economic competition will eventually undermine the feasibility of Deweyan education.

Smith himself could not have advanced the argument in the form I've given, because it's crucial to his analysis that capital is best invested locally. In the most quoted passage of *The Wealth of Nations*, he argues that entrepreneurs will suffer disadvantages if they try to profit from ventures carried out in foreign countries, so that, under the assumption that opportunities for local investment are always at hand, they will always prefer "the domestic to the foreign trade".[29] In our world, the speed of global communication and the ability to direct and supervise a distant workforce make Smith's claim of disadvantage highly dubious. Hence the stage is set for a comparison between systems of education implemented in spatially distant societies, and for a competition based on the idea that capital can flow freely to any region that supplies the best-trained workers at the cheapest price.

You might think that there's an easy rebuttal to the argument. A long tradition of defenses of liberal education – anticipated, as we shall see, by Dewey's own remarks –emphasizes the thought that people who are trained as narrow specialists turn out to be *less able* at supplying the needs of productive economies. Those defenses are based on two main grounds: first, the thought that rapid shifts in technology make workers trained in narrow ways redundant, and second, the view that great breakthroughs in productive technology require habits of mind that are best developed by less utilitarian systems of education. Defenders will cite statistical studies showing the ways in which efforts to focus education too narrowly fail in one of these ways. Yet I think any serious discussion of educational ideas ought to wonder how far one can extrapolate from studies of this sort. For the serious issue is whether, for any Deweyan system of education, there is a Smithian alternative whose expected economic efficiency is higher, and that issue can't be settled by comparing particular educational systems that countries happen to have tried (comparisons that don't take into account: economic asymmetries among countries, or whether the systems in question are seriously Deweyan, or whether the economic context is akin to the current circumstances of global capitalism).

In effect, the classical defenses of liberal education focus on C, and deny that Deweyan education diminishes efficiency. On the face of it, these defenses are

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[29] *Wealth of Nations* 484-5. This discussion introduces the famous image of the "invisible hand", in arguing for the conclusion that production processes suited to the locale are always preferable. I'm not going to undertake a full critique of Smith's reasoning here.

committed to a very strong claim, to wit that attention to goals that initially appear to be hard to achieve and strikingly different from those recommended by Smith – goals like the fostering of human individuality and the development of capacities for sympathy with fellow-citizens whose situations differ widely – can be undertaken without loss of economic efficiency. The obvious worry is that doing more in domains without evident impact on economic success will have to be compensated for by doing less well in those aspects of education that are dedicated to fashioning a productive workforce.

Dewey saw clearly that a simple additive version of this idea won't do. In his incisive little book on moral education, he debunks the superficial thought that fostering an ability to make ethical decisions requires explicit teaching of ethical statements.[30] He notes, correctly I believe, that the ethical component of a system of education might lie in the *way* that the individual subjects are taught. To focus the point sharply, and perhaps in a more ambitious way than Dewey intended, we might envisage two systems of education that taught exactly the same explicit propositions and exactly the same non-ethical cognitive skills, but differed in respect of their success at cultivating habits of ethical reflection and decision: in the extreme, one might realize the ideal of inculcating such habits as perfectly as we have reason to hope for, and the other might fail to do so at all.

It's now possible to formulate more exactly the lines along which a defense of Deweyan education should go. The ambitious form of the defense is to suppose that Deweyan education can succeed just as well as any Smithian rival, because it can achieve exactly the same Smithian goals, and do so in ways that realize the Deweyan ideals. A less ambitious version would deny exact equivalence, urging that although certain bodies of expertise may be less fully developed under a Deweyan regime, there will be compensating gains because of the inculcation of cognitive skills that turn out to be economically important, skills that are by-products of the efforts to realize Deweyan goals. So, in striving to educate people to find extended meanings in experience, we generate a class of workers among whom will be the great innovators of productive technology.

As I've already said, I don't think that existing comparisons of rival ways of educating people settle the general issue here, and a more refined consideration of the circumstances in which the Smithian argument arises for us may help to show why. Smith effectively concentrates on a particular type of worker, one assigned in the division of labor to a routine that can be learned by anyone. Although it's sometimes common to characterize such workers as "unskilled", the crucial point is that their skills are accessible to the vast majority of the population. Among such workers there's a continuum of cases, defined by the length of time and effort required to acquire the

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[30] MPE 1-4; see also DE 354-7.

pertinent skills, but, for simplicity, I'll introduce a dichotomous classification: some skills can be inculcated quickly, and others take a long time and a great deal of training. Besides workers of this sort, there are also others whose performance depends on their having talents that aren't widely shared. Simplifying again, I'll suppose that there's a class of workers who are able to perform complex tasks in economic production because they have abilities shared only by a few and because they have undergone a lengthy and demanding training. Within this class, I'll distinguish a subset whose role in the economy is to initiate new forms of technology.

Let me emphasize again that splitting the workforce into discrete classes is a grotesque over-simplification, one I introduce solely for the purposes of sharpening the argument with which we're concerned. We have four categories of work based on skills that are (a) obtainable by many and easily acquired, (b) obtainable by many and acquired only with considerable effort, (c) obtainable only by a few, with effort, and oriented to existing technology, and (d) obtainable only by a few, with effort, and directed at innovation. Call the four types of people "ordinary workers", "specialized workers", "elite workers", and "innovators", respectively.

Smith's original proposals about education consider only ordinary workers, and depend upon his recognition that ordinary workers don't need extensive education. His pessimistic judgment of their likely fate expresses the thought that, even were they to be given extensive education, its effects would be blunted by the conditions of their work. Given the familiar criticism that education is needed to equip people for situations in which they have to acquire new skills, Smith might respond that there will always be a need for ordinary workers and that, under changing conditions, there will be no bar to their acquiring whatever new ordinary skills the new technologies demand.

The idea that education promotes a valuable flexibility is more pertinent to the situation of the next two classes, the specialized workers and the elite workers. Dewey's own version of the appeal to necessary flexibility tacitly presupposes that contemporary industry depends on the performance of these two groups: "… an attempt to train for too specific a mode of efficiency defeats its own purpose. When the occupation changes its methods, such individuals are left behind with even less ability to readjust themselves than if they had a less definite training."[31] A simple model will bring out Dewey's point. Imagine two systems of education. The first, system A, wastes no time on any features that aren't found in the prevailing technology. The second, system B, provides a broader training in the background field in which the specialists' fields are embedded. (So, for a concrete example, one offers an in-depth immersion in a particular programming language, and the other provides extensive education in mathematics, logic, and computer science.) Assuming that new

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[31] DE 119.

technology can be expected to be introduced when a specialist, or elite, worker is in mid-career, it isn't implausible to suppose that system B will prove superior to system A.

Unfortunately, however, this appeal to flexibility doesn't favor Deweyan education over Smithian rivals. What's crucial is to identify the *background fields* out of which new technologies are likely to come. So, system B provides specialized workers with background skills not directly pertinent to their first jobs, but relevant both to the initial specialties and to specialties that are likely to be needed when the original jobs are superseded. For the elite workers, the emphasis on background is even more important, since the identification of talent and the selection of those who are to acquire the elite skills will go better if the criteria for selection are framed in terms of the background field; otherwise there's a serious chance that people will be selected who can't be retrained under the new technologies, with consequent shortfall in the workforce. The trouble, however, is that the emphasis on broadening the training doesn't entail any consideration of the features on which Dewey (and Mill) place so much emphasis. Simply knowing a broader area of some science, or acquiring a broader set of practical or cognitive skills, need not, on the face of it, involve any serious development of abilities in ethical decision-making, any contemplation of the possibilities for human lives, any expansion of sympathies with fellow-citizens, any appreciation of the wider forms of human culture, or any contribution to the progress of democracy. Even when considerations of flexibility are introduced, Dewey's attractive goals look like expensive luxuries.

An obvious response would be to suggest that the account I've given only deflects the challenge that Smithian education is inflexible because it assumes a certain predictability in technological development. The difference between systems A and B lay in the fact that B focused on the "background field" out of which future technological developments were expected to come. To institute a Smithian version of system B would thus presuppose that we could mark out the pertinent field in advance, and, because of the unpredictability of technology, this is impossible. We'd do better, so the argument goes, to cast our net very broadly, and to frame a system of education along Deweyan lines. The point can be underscored by considering the fourth class of workers. If a society is to have a serious chance of training innovators, then, it's suggested, its educational system must acquaint them with the full extent of human thought and culture, so that they may be stimulated from any direction.

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to me that any of this works. As Dewey saw so clearly, any system of education has to be selective[32] – it would be sheer folly to think that one could acquaint students with the full variety of human thought and culture.

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[32] DE 187.

The issue between Deweyan education and Smith's utilitarian goals concerns the likely consequences for technological innovation of guiding the selection either by attention to the ideals of Dewey's rich notion of democracy, or by offering a more specialized education in the sciences that form the contemporary background to technology. There's no evidence that the former is a particularly good approach, and, under a situation of uncertainty, the most reasonable option would seem to be to institute a mixed system of education, one in which the vast majority of the population were educated under Smithian systems of education, aimed at producing ordinary workers, specialized workers, elite workers, in the latter cases with appropriate emphasis on breadth of background field; a small number of especially talented young people might be offered a more extensive education in the hopes of encouraging their creativity; almost all of them would be directed towards the fields that underlie prevalent technologies, without any special concern for classroom time in areas that might improve them as democratic citizens, but a tiny minority would be educated in the Deweyan way, as a small experiment into whether this approach might generate the results presupposed by classic defenses of liberal education. Ironically, any stratified approach of this sort would be completely at odds with Dewey's fundamental emphasis on integrating education and democracy, and would further contribute to that fragmentation of the public of which he complained.[33] In effect, it would restore a fundamental division of the ancient world, a conception of the search for the good life as an occupation of the privileged few.

VII

So far, I've suggested that any Deweyan system of education (and probably any Millian system) has a more economically efficient Smithian rival. I want next, rather briefly, to attend to the last stages of the argument, and to the thought that there's a dynamic in global capitalism that will tend to eliminate Deweyan education.

Let me begin with a scenario that has probably already occurred to you as an illustration of some of my points. It's no secret that in some areas of the world, particularly in India, China and other parts of East Asia, educational systems produce young people whose mathematical skills and knowledge of the physical and biological sciences greatly outrun those of their counterparts in North America and Western Europe. With the emergence of a very large potential workforce that can supply plenty of specialized workers and elite workers, probably at rates of pay cheaper, or no more expensive than, those demanded in the West, we can expect the migration of capital to South Asia and East Asia. Americans and Western Europeans may continue

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[33] There are many places in which Dewey attacks the idea of educationally-generated class divisions; see DE 122, 136, 251-2, 260, 289, 318. These are transpositions into the educational context of the central theme of PP.

to figure in those parts of the economic sector that can't easily be exported, or as ordinary workers, or as innovators (to the extent that their systems of education supply innovators at higher rates). The ready replication of innovation will prevent any serious lag time between the emergence of new profitable technologies in any part of the world and their deployment in any other, so that the locations of greatest production will be those that supply the largest, cheapest, and most qualified army of specialist and elite workers. In these circumstances, the economic basis of Deweyan systems of education will be undercut: nations will have to go Smithian to compete.

I don't claim that this scenario is inevitable, but it seems to me plausible, if you believe the preceding steps of the Smithian analysis. If you suspend the happy belief that Deweyan education is economically as efficient (or more efficient) than more utilitarian schemes, then it's not a large step to conclude that the present conditions of global capitalism introduce a competition among systems of education in which Dewey's favorite will lose. In effect, there's a dynamic in capitalism that brings together two different ideas in Marx, the diagnosis of the plight of the worker in the *1844 Manuscripts* and the abstract form of the intensified immiseration of the worker in *Capital*: the growth of capitalism inevitably undermines our best attempts to foster valuable forms of human life, attempts that conceive education as Dewey did.

VIII

But Dewey foresaw all this – or so I think. The central theme of *Democracy and Education* is that full commitment to democracy requires a very ambitious program of education, one that is no longer willing to "treat the schools as an agency for transferring the older division of labor and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class, into a society nominally democratic."[34] At two points, he clearly and explicitly sees "present economic conditions" as needing transformation if his educational program is to be realized.[35] So he would not see the Smithian challenge as requiring us to turn away from Deweyan education – that would be to give up on the project of democracy – but rather as a call to change economic conditions so that democracy and Deweyan education both become possible.

I end as I began, with an affirmation of the Deweyan conception of philosophy – and also with a brief defense. Dewey claimed that the central questions of philosophy were questions about how to live, both as individuals and in society. He saw these questions as arising at a wide variety of times and places, and as being focused by pertinent features of the social and cultural context. Philosophers respond to these

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34 DE 318; see also DE 87, 192.

35 DE 98, 136.

more localized and precise forms of the general question, and their attempts to provide answers generate further issues – so arise the fields of metaphysics and epistemology, as ancillary domains that have to be explored to make progress on the fundamental issues. As that exploration proceeds, however, it's all too easy for technical issues to gain a life of their own, and for them to be pursued without any sense of the ultimate purpose. Philosophy ossifies, becoming removed from the needs of the ambient culture. Dewey invites his contemporaries – and us – to scrutinize the accepted agenda and accepted programs of philosophy, in the interests of addressing the most important questions as they arise within our own place and time.[36]

To accept that invitation is to place the general theory of education at the center of philosophy: to ask what is needed in our context for people to lead valuable lives, both individually and collectively. Posing those central philosophical questions again, we find, I suggest, the sorts of philosophical projects that have surfaced in this essay. The crucial questions for philosophers today have very little to do with consciousness and qualia, with the analysis of epistemic justification, with internalism or externalism about reasons, or any of a multitude of other subjects that fill the pages of professional journals that attract a tiny, but oddly devoted, readership. Rather, our most important tasks are to articulate further the Deweyan connection between democracy and education, to probe more accurately the economic preconditions of democratic education, to expose as precisely as possible the sources of conflict between capitalism, as we now have it, and Dewey's ambitious project, and, on that basis, to conceive of ways of modifying the economic constraints. To identify, or re-identify, the project of philosophy in this way is only to take a tiny step towards carrying out this task, but I believe that it is a step worth taking.

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[36] I take this to be the call of *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, although the same themes pervade many of Dewey's other works (see, for example, *The Quest for Certainty*).

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