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John Dewey, From Philosophy of Pragmatism to Progressive Education

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ABSTRACT

The reason for this publication has been our interest in educational issues on the one hand, and, on the other, in the philosophy of education of J. Dewey. This resulted in further approaching the philosophy of Pragmatism and considering its influence on J. Dewey's philosophy of education. At the same time, we have sought the influences on his work from Aristotelian thought. In this direction, we show that the American philosopher considered the philosophy of pragmatism as applicable to a democratic education, which is also considered to be moral education.

Keywords: Democracy, Education, Experience, Laboratory School, Philosophy of Education, Pragmatism, Progressive Education, Relation between Individual and Society, School and Society.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to highlight the ideas and argumentation of J. Dewey's work, concerning the necessity of forming a democratic education, in which today's students and tomorrow's citizens, will be able to learn to communicate with their social environment, to raise questions and to think correctly, so as to work with their peers, in order to make serious decisions and to be aware of the consequences of their actions, through self-control and acquired self-criticism. Our thesis is that Aristotelian thought influenced J. Dewey's philosophy of education. This influence transformed the proposal for a democratic education to be deemed also a moral education.

This paper discusses the influence of J. Dewey's philosophical theories on pedagogical science. First, we provide some biographical information and then we discuss the influence of his theories relating to the theory of knowledge and the aim of education. Next, we present his basic philosophical and pedagogical views, and how the two greatest ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, influenced his philosophical and pedagogical thinking. Finally, we present our conclusions on the subject, based on our research.

1.1 The necessity of examining the issue

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The reason we chose this particular subject is that this great philosopher, psychologist and pedagogue manages to condense and to convey his whole philosophical thought in relation to education, in the most unadorned manner. An additional reason is a lack in the current Greek literature on the philosophy of Pragmatism in general, and its main representative J. Dewey, in particular.

1.2 Aims and goals

The aim of this article is to make known J. Dewey's progressive education, with a motive to show the form that the philosophy of Pragmatism took in his thought and how it could be applied practically in the establishment of a progressive education, as he envisioned it.

The basic aim of our research has been to record the ways in which the movement from pragmatic philosophy to educational theory takes place in the work of J. Dewey.

The basic aim of our introduction is to show that the American thinker founds his theory for the existence of a democratic education on the philosophy of Pragmatism.

2. Methodology of bibliographical research

The search of bibliographical sources related to our subject took place primarily through articles published in journals, monographs, books, chapters in books and encyclopedias, in relation to Dewey's philosophy of Pragmatism.

Due to the nature of the subject matter, we employed the research and study of texts, on the basis of bibliographical research. We performed an exhaustive consultation of sources located primarily through the National Documentation Centre and through specific electronic bibliographical data-bases, such as OPAC and JSTOR, as well as a systematic study of the thinker's main works.

We also discuss the effect of pragmatism on the formulation of Dewey's philosophical and pedagogical ideas, on the era's thought and on the thinker himself. In this way, we try to get a firmer grasp on the basis of his general thinking.

An ongoing research concern is the way in which the thinker compounded his theory of the philosophy of pragmatism, as a basic process in his work as a philosopher of education.

3. The philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey

According to J. Dewey, in order to make clear the value, and the meaning and the truth of the concept of democracy understood, we need to link it to the individual's social action and their involvement with social processes, one of which is progressive education. In this light, this American thinker places the philosophy of pragmatism at the service of his democratic beliefs. At the heart of these beliefs is the placement of individual thinking at the service of social-individual action. However, he does not accept a transcendent reality but rather connects reality with experience³. In this lies the core of pragmatism, which was the answer to the dipole of rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism advocates that only reason constitutes the main cognitive power, which can reach the knowledge of reality through *a-priori* logical categories or innate ideas, while empiricism attributes any human knowledge to experience⁴. Pragmatism advocates the unity of knowledge and action, of values and experience. It introduces a criterion or rule (pragmatist maxim) for the meaning of concepts. The main idea of this rule is that the meaning of a concept is located at its consequences, i.e. in the way it alters the behavior of human beings, and not at a metaphysical search⁵.

Through this pragmatism, Dewey raised all that he altruistically advocated in the field of social practice: critical thinking, abstract knowledge, utilitarianism, empiricism and experimentation. The philosopher's above position leads us to conclude that pragmatic philosophy was similarly influenced by the philosophical thought of Kant, Hegel, Darwin, Pierce and James. The influence of these five

³ See G. Karafili, "Philosophical conceptions of C. Peirce J. Dewey on educational theory", Periodical "Tribune of social sciences", No. 36. 2006, p. 51.

⁴ See Gr. Kostara. "Philosophical Preparation" 5th edition Athens, 2003. See. also, An. Giannara. Translation-Introduction-Comments. Critique of pure reason, Im. Kant, Ed. Papazisi, p. 71.

⁵ See. Christopher Hookway, "Pragmatism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/pragmatism/>

philosophers will gradually lead Dewey to the further development of a new instrumental, tool-based, naturalistic Pragmatism⁶.

At the center of his naturalism lies the dynamic concept of experience. The aftermath of this conceptualization is the Platonic pluralistic understanding concerning the methods through which human self-control is revealed. These methods are none other than our experiences, actions and aspirations⁷. This viewpoint partly explains Dewey's occasional positive attitude towards ancient Greek philosophers, primarily Plato and Aristotle⁸.

Within this framework, Dewey turns to the past, not in order to seek solutions from it, but to build on its basis a new form of education. This kind of education seeks to integrate the moral, the beneficial, the humanitarian, social, cognitive, and the aesthetic field. Its background is the Aristotelian philosophical experience of education, and it will shape a moral-democratic educational community full of aesthetic and instructive experiences, whose dimensions, imagination, feelings, experiences and concepts, will increase and improve the quality of moral education⁹. This kind of education as highlighted in the past by Aristotle, will provide humans with what the natural world is unable to offer¹⁰.

Inspired by ancient Greek philosophy, and in terms of the dynamics of the relationship between humans and nature, Dewey attempts to activate the young person to move in that direction. Specifically, he tries to lead the student to the ability to perceive the value of human interaction with nature, mostly by means of the connection of natural with humanist studies. Therefore, his instrumentalist theory concerning the identification of reality with the usefulness of an idea or a concept, is based on the Platonic and Aristotelian concept of the relation of nature to man¹¹.

4. The pragmatism of John Dewey and Aristotelian thought

J. Anton, referring specifically to American pragmatism, considers that the development of the movement of naturalism in the context of pragmatism coincided with the rebirth of ancient Greek thought and, in particular, with the revival of Aristotelian naturalistic thought¹².

Using Aristotelian thinking, Dewey in particular highlights the conflict of the individual's inner psyche and consciousness, that takes place between feelings, beliefs, desires, and human will. More specifically, through logical reasoning, human will results in a rational act that serves the public interest¹³.

On a simple biological level, humans as rational beings respond to problems arising from their relationship to nature by implementing analogous instinctual behaviors. Nevertheless, on a mental level there lies a moment of rational thought and deliberation between a problem posed by an objective situation and the response directly dictated by instinct. This results in the individual suspecting and predicting a variety of possible solutions, eventually selecting the one that feels more satisfying and correct¹⁴. More specifically, individual rational action and social adjustment are also characteristic of rational human behavior, which, as already noted by Aristotle in *Politics*, enables individuals to decide

6 On the philosophical positions which influenced J. Dewey, see. J. E. Tiles, Dewey, Routledge, London, 1988, p. 5. Tiles determines the instrumentalism of Dewey as the concept that in the view of scientific theories, constitutes the embodiment of knowledge, in other words what we call actual knowledge, i.e. the individual experiences. See. J. E. Tiles, Dewey, Routledge, London, 1988, p.6.

7 Regarding the importance of Dewey's instrumentalist pragmatism see. J. R. Shook, pp. 266-268. In: S. Triantari, The Philosophy of pragmatism in education, ed. Stamoulis, Thessaloniki 2012, p. 12.

8 Campell argues that in the interactive discussion of Dewey with the philosophers of the past, he did not consider them as opponents, unlike his contemporary thinkers. See J. Campell Understanding John Dewey, Open Court, U.S.A., 1996, p. 89.

9 See A. D. Sapouna, Pedagogical Conceptions of Aristotle, University Press, Thessaloniki, 2005, pp. 55-56.

10 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337 a, 1-3.

11 With regard to the above comment on the relationship between ancient Greek and American Naturalism, see. J. Anton, American Naturalism and Greek Philosophy, Humanity Books, Amherst, 2005, p. 188. (as cit., at, I. K. Markopoulos, / Anton, J. P., book review. Greek Philosophical Review. Vol. . 23 no.3, . 2006, pp. 280-284).

12 See. J. Anton, 2005, p. 43. (In, I.K. Markopoulos, 2006, pp. 280-284).

13 Aristotle, *On the soul*, 432 b 4-6, 434 a, 11-13, 433 b, 7-8.

14 Dewey considers that human life is characterized by a unique situation, that pushes humans to transcend their "natural"-instinctive existence. Therefore, man has to establish himself with his own free actions, in order to become a truly intellectual, moral and free being. See. J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. New York, 1916, p. 110.

and sometimes to act against their nature, instincts and addictions¹⁵. Through Aristotelian perspective, which sets the spiritual and moral refinement of the individual as the aim of education, contributing thus to the State's bliss, the American philosopher combines knowledge to the behavior of students as the most proper direction of the whole educational process¹⁶.

5. John Dewey and moral education

The American philosopher's clear preference for Aristotelian ethics is justified by the fact that virtue for Aristotle equals the competence for righteous acts, which are in turn achieved through continuous exercise for the conquest of virtue¹⁷.

Aristotle's moral ideal in particular, is the activeness of the individual, which he considers the greatest efficiency of human activity and, furthermore, a manifestation of the cognition of rational beings¹⁸. At the same time, the American thinker finds in Aristotelian contemplation a key argument regarding the bridging of rational thought with proper action¹⁹. This bridging comes through appropriate relationships with other people.

Through this spirit of his theory, the connection of the humanities with natural studies strengthens the value of knowledge in addressing problematic situations. The thinker sees this connection under the light of Platonic thought, thus aiming to individual growth, social prosperity and to the proper functioning of social associations²⁰. So, if we consider the thinker as a social philosopher, we have to classify him closer to Platonic views. As J. Anton aptly observes, the philosopher's positions regarding social associations are closer to Platonic positions. Perhaps this could be viewed as a manifestation of sympathy towards Platonic contemplation²¹. As a result, both Dewey and his predecessor Plato are characterized by similar social spirit and seek its designation, with the purpose of cultivating moral values, that in turn lead to an educational-environmental moral education.

Consequently, the combination of knowledge, research, experience and teaching objects has as its educational effect, the emergence of a new moral education, according to the American thinker. For the American pedagogue, moral education is an integral part of the curriculum and the learning experience of students that extends far beyond school studying. In this context, it is advisable for students to acquire general knowledge in appropriate educational and social conditions, since they become aware of their social importance. At the same time, Knowledge should nurture the learner's moral interest, in order to aid the development of ethical insights. This, of course, assumes that studies and students' occupation with them must affect the direction and nature of interactive experiences.

Based on the above, the American pragmatist sensed the importance of the fundamental connection between family and school, as well as between school and social life. Within this framework he included the avoidance of any kind of separation between practical and theoretical studies. This is because this separation would reduce the moral quality of the students' knowledge, a quality manifested through the range of perspective, the openness of spirit, the commitment to honesty, the thoroughness and the responsibility regarding the consequences of the ideas adopted by them²².

Moreover, in an aspired moral education the ideal is to achieve the passage from self-interest to wholeness and from family to society. This confirms the educational process not only as a social function, but also as a social institution. The lack of a diffuse social spirit and the prevention of highlighting of work and play act as a counterpoint to the adoption of such a form of education is²³.

15 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1332, 1332 – a 38 b 11. See also F.K. Vorou, 1999, p. 51.

16 See G.E. Xekalou, & G.E. Papageorgiou, *Education throughout the centuries: History, Leading Figures, Directions*. Vol. A, Heraklion, 1969, p. 134.

17 Aristotle, *Ethical Nikomacheia III*, 1130 b , 93, 11-12.

18 See A.D. Sapouna, *Pedagogical Conceptions of Aristotle*, University Press, Thessaloniki, 2005, p. 60.

19 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102 a , pp. 5-35

20 As a product of this connection, Dewey highlighted via the "method of problem solving" introduced initially by himself, then finished by his pupil W. Kilpatrick , the educational "method of interdisciplinarity", whose main source is the Platonic contemplation. See. Plato, *Republic*, 537 b – c.

21 See. J . Anton , 2005, pp. 132-134. (In I.K. Markopoulos, 2006, pp. 280-284). See also J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1980, p. 278.

22 See. J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1980, pp. 356-357. Compare K. Papaioannou, "The concept of education as interaction in the educational philosophy of John Dewey", *New Education*, 71, 1994, p. 85.

23 About the importance of play in education, see Aristotle's *Politics*, 1336 a , 33-34, and F.K. Vorou, ' A philosophy of education in Aristotle's *Politics* '. *Political philosophy of Aristotle and its effects*, at K. Voudouris, Athens, 1999, p.52.

The American philosopher espouses the Aristotelian perception of practical wisdom, manifested mainly in *Nicomachean Ethics*,²⁴ where Aristotle specifies that the character of the individual is not separated from their actions²⁵. In particular, in the ethics of Dewey we distinguish the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom, through which the philosopher promotes the moral virtue of a person through hands-on experience, as if it is an art, architecture for example²⁶.

According to the American thinker, Aristotle's view confuted the Socratic and Platonic teaching, which argues that knowing is identical to virtue. According to Aristotle, a person cannot acquire theoretical insight of what is good, but only through constant practical exercise and education²⁷. As masters of themselves, individuals become able to accept the pedagogical requirements and make their own decision to reject bad manners, malice - insobriety - brutality, and to elect all kinds of virtue. "*Within the person lies virtue as well as malice*"²⁸. A person who has reached self-knowledge, in accordance with the Aristotelian definition of prudence, "*knowing yourself is a kind of knowledge*"²⁹, draws wisdom from experience and makes him or herself wise. This wisdom excels scientific knowledge and is associated to experience. This is why it is a typical feature of the elderly³⁰. This view of Aristotle, which Dewey obviously adopts in an indirect way, finds application in his time, but it is also present in modern education as well as in contemporary teaching, in discussions between teachers and students or parents of the problems that arise in the classroom.

Human communication is also related to the blissful life of Aristotle. Most importantly, the dynamics of human communication emanate through Aristotelian wisdom, in other words the grace and strength of people, which transfigure non-human living conditions into a pleasant social and individual atmosphere³¹. At this point, Dewey invites the reader to understand this relation of communication with others as a self-declared intellectual and empathetic process, which relies on his pragmatic philosophy³². It is self-declared, interpersonal or, according to St. Fesmire, "the process of dramatic rehearsal"³³. This means to live the experience that one will communicate primarily through the eyes of another. Aristotle comments on this empathetic intelligence in human communication in *Nicomachean Ethics*³⁴. In other words, the capacity of two interlocutors to transmit, to understand and to feel each other through the transmission of experiences.

Very often citing philosophical positions of Plato and Aristotle, and particularly highlighting their positive aspects, the American philosopher emphasizes the meaning of the political system of the concept of democracy. Specifically, a democratic society has as its cornerstones freedom and equality, which are taught to children in the context of the educational process. He considers that there is an internal and unbreakable relationship between the political ideal of democracy and the educational ideal of contemplative thinking as elements of autonomy and freedom of the human mind. This relationship, which the American thinker bravely defended, has been the focus of progressive training³⁵. In this case, a good and moral democratic education is one in which people equally and freely develop all abilities and skills. The American philosopher supports this democratic conception in his

24 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098 b.

25 According to the Stoics prudence is the science of practical wisdom, in which man has proper will for what is required or not required to do; See. R. W. Sharples , *An introduction to hellenistic philosophy*, transl. M. Lympourli, G. Avramidi, Athens, 2002, pp. 143-144.

26 R. B. Westbrook points out that in his theory of moral life, Dewey assimilates a Third tradition that concerns the moral argument on the portrait of a good Democrat. This is the Aristotelian tradition of moral virtues. See . R. B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 160-161.

27 The M. Nussbaum explains that "Aristotelian education aims to produce distinct citizens." See M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* of Chicago University, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 305. (At S. Trantari, p. 10)

28 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI , 12, 1144 a , 6-7.

29 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 28, 1141 b 33-34.

30 Aristotle, *Politics*, 8th, 1329 Ah, 15-17, '*Nicomachean Ethics*' 28, 1142 b 11-20. '*Nicomachean Ethics*' VI 8,122, 7-8. See D. Koutras, *Flashbacks to Ancient Greek philosophy*, ed. Athena. Athens, 1998, p. 75.

31 See. Aristotle , *Hortatory* , 10.

32 J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1980, pp. 5-6.

33 St. Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination, Pragmatism in Ethics*, Indiana University Press, U.S.A., 2003, p. 36.

34 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106 b.

35 J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1980, pp. 354-355.

work *Democracy and Education*, in which he praises the social philosophy of Plato where the young person is able to develop and train his or her special abilities through proper education³⁶.

Both Plato and Dewey in particular agree that those who govern must be “educated – enlightened.” This leads them both to embrace democracy. However, regarding the separation of classes and potentials that ensure justice in Plato, Dewey considers that ensuring justice is achieved by the all-round and harmonious development of the abilities of the person³⁷.

6. Concluding remarks

Our occupation with Dewey’s pragmatism has induced us to conclude that the American philosopher formulated his own naturalistic-instrumentalist Pragmatism, while being influenced by G.W. Fr. Hegel, Ch. R. Darwin, Ch. C. Pierce and W. James. This is a Pragmatism in which we can discern elements (facets) of the philosophical movements of Constructivism and Pluralism. Based on these philosophical movements, he reinforced the connection of democracy to education, thus integrating this relation in the notion of progressive education.

Everything discussed concerning the ethical behavior of young persons, which also involve the proper development of their personality, revive Aristotle’s views on the philosophy of education. The American philosopher’s pragmatic morality finds response and is founded on this Aristotelian contemplation, as it is present in his philosophy of education. Dewey envisioned a democratic and moral education that, as rightly noted by his predecessor Aristotle, must direct the person to virtue, which is a prerequisite rational acts, since humans, as social beings, prosper within an organized society, consisting of individuals.

In particular, Aristotle prioritizes the connection of moral cultivation through learning, stressing the necessity for all young people to have the same training. This necessity is also noted by the American thinker within the framework of a democratic education, in which all people will be trained equally regardless of color, gender and social class.

Here emerges the point where the moral democratic education of Dewey meets the virtuous life of our ancient ancestors. This moral life is what the American thinker refers to by citing Aristotle and recalling the same concern raised by the ancient Greek philosopher: whether in the educational system of a country only the development of intellect should be undertaken or the morality of character as well.

The American pragmatist philosopher, educator and social reformer J. Dewey believes that all citizens must be educated equally and also by means of a common learning process. Throughout this learning process, human beings are closely related to the environment in which they act, move and think, within which they may subsequently develop their activities and highlight their skills³⁸.

J. Dewey was a vocal advocate of the unbreakable and undivided relationship between democracy and education. This relationship between democracy and education he places within the social environment, as this “*consists of those conditions which stimulate or inhibit, promote or impede, the characteristic activities of a living creature*”³⁹.

He also held that human adaptation to a continually changing environment took place mainly through the activation of three human qualities: will, intellect and emotion. Pointing out the interplay between the three aforementioned human characteristics in the process of human action formation, Dewey’s theory takes on an otherwise voluntaristic character, due to which his views were rejected by the intellectualists of his day.

Therefore, J. Dewey directly linked his Pragmatism as a philosophical theory and applicable pedagogical practice, to the need for the fulfillment of a democratic society and an equal education. His Pragmatism strengthened the mutual relationship of democracy and education, having as its main axis the meaning of the word “experience“. He highlighted the presence of philosophy not only in education viewed as a theory workable in practice, but also in emphasizing those problems, which are

36 Westbrook says that according to Dewey democratic societies grow democratic beliefs in children to form good characters. See. R . B . Westbrook, 1991, p. 172.

37 In Platonic education specifically, the uniqueness of the individual has been cast aside, in order to meet the needs of the state. See J . Dewey , *Democracy and Education*, 1980, pp. 88-91.

38 See H. C. Christopoulos, *The new school and today's educational reality*, Grigoris, Athens, 2005, p. 27.

39 J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1980, p. 12.

linked to the crisis in civilization, and the values that focus mainly on the harmonious cooperation and free communication of citizens.

From our bibliographical research we have come to the conclusion that J. Dewey viewed pragmatism (with experience as its main component) as vital for the actualization of democracy and the avoidance of its social ills. J. Dewey's pragmatic perception for a moral democratic education that will pervade contemporary Greek education is an important tool in order to counteract social ills in contemporary Greek society. Moreover, his extensive work contributes to create a spirit of democracy in today's students and tomorrow's citizens, thus expanding the horizons of the Greek educational system and inspiring both educational institutions in our country and Greek society as a whole. Finally, he recognized the fact that philosophy can be useful in problem solution and human communication.

7. Epilogue

The effect of Dewey's ideas on pedagogical thought is undeniable. Inspired by democratic ideas which included the vision of a harmonious and moral society that advocated individuality and sociability regardless of race, gender and class, Dewey argued and worked hard towards a democratic education based on common interests and activities between young people.

Originally led by the idea of the unity of Hegel's world and specifically by "the idea of monism", Dewey rejected traditional dualisms, prevalent in the philosophical and pedagogical views of his time. Through this perspective, he attempted to achieve a compromise between important philosophical and pedagogical antinomies of his day, such as those between the individual and society, theory and action, mind and matter, humans and nature, theoretical and empirical learning. In time, however, he revised Hegel's notion of the Absolute and turned towards an experimental philosophical approach, paying greater attention to scientific method and the value of experimental proof in the learning process, thus achieving to combine philosophical thought with experimental science.

Although he is critical towards the ideas of the Enlightenment at times, he does not seem to become the victim of philosophical skepticism and much less of pedagogical pessimism, situations which leave little scope for hopefulness and vision in education. In summary, through his philosophy of education J. Dewey attempted to express his optimism concerning human potential and his belief in the educational potential of personal experience and philosophical thinking, as well as democratic communication and cooperation.

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