

## The BOOK TRAIL

— SIDNEY J. ABELSON —

Before the Classic Age of Pericles immortalized the Glories That Were Greece; before Herodotus, the Father of History sired his high art, there flourished beyond the site of the Great Wall a "civilized, mild, just and frugal" people who already counted their history in long slow centuries.

The Chinese are today, as they were in the sixth century before Christ, a "civilized, mild, just and frugal" people. In numbers they outdistance all the other nationalities of mankind, but in industrial achievement their record is notoriously poor; they are out of tune with the times, and, ironically enough, their present sufferings can be traced largely to those very virtues which distinguish their national character.

The Greeks today play a minor role in world affairs, but their ancient forbears bequeathed the beginnings and much of the foundation of what is called Western Civilization. In a sense, we are all Greeks, for if derivation of cultural traditions is the criterion of nationhood, every being alive today, except possibly some still savage tribesmen, is subject to Hellenic influences and guided in many respects by Hellenic standards.

It is a curious fact to me that Confucius who rejected concern with supernatural problems and propounded a philosophy for practical use in life on earth, contributed to the establishment of national traditions which are, as things go now, eminently impractical; while the Greeks who labored so assiduously with metaphysical questions, provided the bases for practical progress in many departments of endeavor. It seems that nature demands more than a modicum of wastefulness in our efforts; the fruitless attempts to discover Ultimate Reality or the nature of Being qua Being are primed by a curiosity that knows no confinement, but relentlessly pursues knowledge in all fields.

Some day I hope to go into this subject more thoroughly; meanwhile, space limitations being what they are, I must take leave of it abruptly and come to the point: Philosophers for thousands of years have asked themselves "What is True Knowledge?" "How much can we know?" "How do we know that we know what we know?" And ultimately, of course, "What is Is?"

Confucius had a simple formula. To one like myself who found practical inspiration in William James' forthright approach to philosophical problems there is something nostalgic about this simplicity. "The way to do a thing," said James, "is to do it"; and thereby promul-

gated the basic theme of pragmatism. Confucius answered the question as to true knowledge in this manner: "To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge."

Philosophers of the Western world have not accepted this formula. A long time of Epistemologists and Ontologists have followed in the footsteps of the Greeks, speculating interminably on the nature of Reality and the validity of Knowledge. Even today, in an age supposedly devoted to the test tube and the measuring rod, philosophy concerns itself largely with the intellectually archaeological remains of thousands of years. In practical science disproved assumptions, by and large, sink into desuetude, and thenceforth become almost forgotten history. In philosophy, however, history is the very substance, so that right or wrong, proved or disproved, the great names and systems of the past lag on to bedevil thought and hinder a practical application of philosophic reasoning to the social problems of society now made soluble by the advances of science. If a disproved chemical theory can be excluded from text books as so much useless burden, why cannot disproved philosophical ideas be eliminated as well?

The answer to this question is not so simple as it may sound, for in chemistry proof or disproof is not usually a matter of opinion, while in philosophy opinion keeps alive many ideas which deserve a coup de grace. Philosophy is not a compendium of useful knowledge—though some philosophers have attempted to make it such—it is largely a history of opinion.

Among those who in recent years have sought to establish philosophy as a living guide to social action here and now no name surpasses in importance that of John Dewey, the "Teacher of Teachers." "The burden of one of Dewey's arguments," writes Joseph Ratner in his Introduction to "The Philosophy of John Dewey" (Random House, \$1.25) is that "philosophy rather carries its own past along with it too often and too much as a dead and deadening weight."

Dewey disengaged himself from the restricting influences of traditional philosophy and struck out boldly to discover the functional uses of thoughts. He formulated the idea of "instrumentalism," a practical development of James' pragmatism and the earlier doctrines of Peirce. He pleaded with the eloquence of logic for the coalescence of thought with experience and the utilization of knowledge thus gained as an instrument for the betterment of society. He rejected the supernatural and condemned philosophy's enslavement to the epistemological German schools.

It would be easy enough to disregard the metaphysicians were the effects of their lucubrations unfelt by the practical world. The mischievous possibilities of attempts to solve the seemingly inscrutable facts of the origins of life and the nature of being merely through taking

thought is illustrated effectively in Marxism—an alleged system of economics derived from a metaphysical analysis of the social structure. Marx turned the dialectics of Hegel "right side up" and at the same time nearly turned the world up side down.

Dewey extended the formula of Confucius in the sense that he demanded knowledge be demonstrable in a functional manner. His efforts were directed toward furthering man's realization of his desires.

Selected passages from Dewey's works are now available in this volume of nearly 1100 pages which is aptly sub-titled "Intelligence in the Modern World." Here the reader finds truly illuminating guidance in every important sphere in which philosophical thought can ease man's way and enrich his ultimate reward. The long introduction by Joseph Ratner summarizes Dewey's contribution to philosophy and education and ties together in a logical whole—though not in a rigid system—the wide variety of subjects in the scope of his thought.

I must take exception to some of Dewey's passages on the nature of social cooperation. It seems to me that in this particular subject he has allowed himself to be influenced by those pretty pictures which utopians paint, to such an extent that ends and means have become confused. The natural social state is one of cooperation, of course, but this means cooperation through competition, not through "socialization" of resources, mental or material. To add the qualification "voluntary" to cooperation, as he does, is not enough, for doing so but gives the false implication of universal altruism; and altruism is not a social or an economic quality but a personal and moral attribute. In the economic sphere there can be cooperation only on a basis of struggle for finding the easiest means of satisfying desires, and only competition provides the opportunity to seek such a means.