

CLASSICISTS VERSUS EXPERIMENTALISTS: REEXAMINING THE GREAT DEBATE

Tony W. Johnson

Mortimer Adler's dedication of *The Paideia Proposal* (1982) to John Dewey, as well as to Robert M. Hutchins and Horace Mann, is surprising. It raises several questions, which are discussed in this paper. It is surprising since during the 1930s and 1940s Adler joined the classicists against Dewey and the other experimentalists in the great debate over the kind of education needed in a democracy. As Diane Ravitch notes, the chief antagonists, John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins, "did not disagree about whether children needed to read, or needed to understand the past, or needed to experience literature,"¹ but they did disagree over the appropriate means to achieve these common goals. Ravitch suggests that Adler may now be ready to call a truce, but is it possible to reconcile the classicists' and experimentalists' positions into a desirable educational synthesis? Is Adler, in tendering the olive branch to the followers of Dewey, seeking a genuine truce, or are his kind words a political design to achieve an elusive final victory over the progressives? In seeking answers to such questions, a summary of the classicists' and experimentalists' debate will be presented, followed by a comparison of the educational ideas of Alexander Meiklejohn, the most progressive of the classicists, to those of John Dewey, the undisputed leader of the experimentalists.

In January 1943, Robert M. Hutchins, then president of the University of Chicago, published *Education for Freedom*. This little book aroused the ire of progressive educators. Fearing that Hutchins's eloquence might capture public opinion, liberal educators reacted quickly. John Dewey himself eventually responded to this and other challenges to liberal thought, but Abraham Citron's article in the May 1943 issue of *Teachers College Record* is representative of the experimentalists' position. Agreeing that our nation requires an "education for freedom," Citron suggested that Hutchins's means of achieving such a desirable goal "gave fuel, aid and comfort to the forces of social and educational reaction."² According to Citron, Hutchins' view presupposed the existence of a

JGE: THE JOURNAL OF GENERAL EDUCATION, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1985). Published by The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London.

static world in which the task of creation was already complete. Consequently, human freedom was to be achieved through the recognition and understanding of the immutable truths which define the universe. In contrast to this static world view, the experimentalists perceived the world to be developing with no predetermined pattern. "Hence," said Citron, "any quest for absolute certainty can only be a search for a will of the wisp" (p. 548).

According to Citron, Hutchins—along with other classicists—"wants to eat (his) cake and have it too": the classicists appeal to naturalistic science whenever convenient, while simultaneously seeking "the comforting direction of a transcendental metaphysics" (p. 551). While classicism professes a concern for human freedom and dignity, its inherent dualisms, argued Citron, are more likely to produce a benevolent dictatorship than the "education for freedom" a democracy requires.

Heated rhetoric characterized this conflict. Since both sides agreed that the future of human civilization was at stake, they were quick to condemn one another. Hutchins, for example, criticized the progressives for fostering "the cult of skepticism." He lamented that such phrases as "I don't know because nobody can," or "Everything is a matter of opinion," or, even worse, "I will take no position because I am tolerant and open-minded," had become the prevalent attitude of the day. He castigated the experimentalists for fostering "a cult of immediacy."³ Translated into educational terms, such an attitude suggests that tours of the stockyard and steel plants are better suited to prepare students for the modern world than are traditional historical and literary studies. Such presentism, Hutchins argued, has produced a pervasive materialism, alienating humans from their true essence. Critical of the experimentalists for reducing education to a crude vocationalism that was concerned only with developing producers and consumers, Hutchins saw human civilization collapsing, since gold rather than salvation had become its goal.

To Hutchins, it was obvious that the world needed a moral, intellectual and spiritual reformation, but he thought that the experimentalists could not participate in such a revolution since they believed "that men are no different from the brutes, that morals are another name for mores, that freedom is doing what you please, that everything is a matter of opinion, and that the test of truth is immediate practical success" (p. 47). If a reformation were to occur, education would have to be directed toward virtue and intelligence, with economic activity seen as a means of sustaining life rather than as the goal of life. To accomplish these goals, traditional educators should

devise an education that would be good for all students, and then determine ways of transmitting it to all students.

Such views were anathema to John Dewey. Writing in the August 1944 issue of *Fortune*, Dewey contended that “the attempt to re-establish linguistic skills and materials as the center of education and to do it under the guise of ‘education for freedom’ is directly opposed to all that democratic countries cherish as freedom.”⁴ It is “laughable,” said Dewey, to suggest that a true liberal education consists of the study of one hundred great books, for such an educational theory or philosophy lends support to authoritarian control. Concerned primarily with human beings in this world, Dewey suggested that classicism’s glorification of “the gulf between the ‘material’ and the ‘spiritual,’ between immutable principles and social conditions,” is a step backward, rather than progress toward a genuine liberal education (p. 156). He saw the major fallacy of classicism as its supposition “that the subject matter of a liberal education is fixed in itself.” Since, to Dewey, being “liberated is one with being liberating,” both the content and the process of a genuine liberal education should be characterized by change (p. 156). Dewey agreed with the classicists that education should aim at the development of thinking skills. To him thinking meant a reorganization of natural functions, while for the classicists, thinking aimed at understanding and appreciating the immutable truths which were thought to govern the universe. Dewey agreed that thinking distinguishes humans from brutes, but to him thinking was a process which “does naturally what Kantian forms and schematizations do only supernaturally.”⁵ Finally, Dewey described the attempts of Hutchins and other classicists to revive the liberal arts as reactionary. Though Hutchins offered his “education for freedom” as a cure for the evils of the present world, Dewey suggested that it can be recognized for the “moral quackery it actually is.”⁶

The argumentative differences between these two antagonists are great, but the conflict is even more complex than their rhetoric suggests. There were other actors in this drama. One of them, Alexander Meiklejohn, attempted to bridge the gap between the progressive and the traditional versions of a liberal education.⁷ A willing defender of Hutchins’s Great Books curriculum, Meiklejohn never reified any course of study. Perhaps best known for his Athens-America curriculum at the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin, Meiklejohn readily admitted that he knew of no one best study, or set of studies, for training the mind.⁸ Responding to Dewey’s condemnation of the classicists, Meiklejohn argued that students at both the Experimental College and at St. John’s studied

the past not in an attempt to imitate it, but as a means of fostering their critical intelligence. Students at these institutions read the great books, he explained, “not because these great minds were right but in order to find out what ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are.”⁹

While not receiving the attention often showered on Dewey and Hutchins, Meiklejohn is one of the more interesting characters in this dispute. Characterizing himself as at once idealist and pragmatist, Meiklejohn, says Herbert W. Schneider, attempted “to maintain both a Hegelian and a Darwinian conception of history.”¹⁰ In a lengthy review of Meiklejohn’s *Education Between Two Worlds*, Hal G. Lewis asserts that Meiklejohn, like the experimentalists, was naturalistic, for he and they would “reject any trans-human ways of gaining knowledge.”¹¹ Lewis points out that both held to an evolutionary theory of human nature, discarding “the classical dualism between the mind and the body.” For both, thinking was a process that occurred when difficulties were met and dealt with “not by sheer trial and error but by means of reflective inquiry.” Lewis characterizes both Meiklejohn and the experimentalists as reconstructionists in that both believed “that our customs, beliefs, and ways of acting must be revised and changed in the light of new knowledge and developing conditions” (p. 564). Finally, Lewis concludes that neither believed in absolutes or immutables.

Lewis’s reading of *Education Between Two Worlds* is only partially correct. Meiklejohn did take a naturalistic position here, he did embrace the evolutionary theory of human nature, and he did express views similar to those of Dewey and other experimentalists on the nature of thought. Meiklejohn asserted, for example, “that whatever reason may be, it is human. It is made by men. It arises out of customary human activity.”¹² In later chapters, however, Meiklejohn retreated from his naturalistic approach. He seemed unwilling or unable to completely deny the existence of absolutes or immutables. Recognizing that the traditional religious absolutes had been undermined, Meiklejohn suggested that through their rational powers humans could discover new and equally powerful ones to replace the debunked religious absolutes. In this sense, he joins other classicists in trying to have his cake and eat it too.

Dewey did not publicly comment on Meiklejohn’s *Education Between Two Worlds*, though his disciple, Sidney Hook, characterized it as “a defense, not of democracy, but of a benevolent dictatorship by those who know what we ought to want better than we know ourselves.”¹³ While Dewey did not seem to take Meiklejohn seriously, he was aware of the ongoing argument. In his Gifford Lectures, published in 1929 as *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey spoke

with admiration of Spinoza's bold attempt "to effect a complete integration of scientific method with a good that is fixed and final. . . ." ¹⁴ His comment that "few thinkers have been as willing to sacrifice details of the older tradition in order to save its substance as was Spinoza" (p. 55) could have just as easily been addressed to Meiklejohn. But in spite of his obvious appreciation for Spinoza's effort, Dewey was critical of it. His criticism revolved around differing conceptions of the nature of science and Spinoza's "unquestioning faith that the logical order and connection of ideas is one with the order and connection of existence" (p. 57). Spinoza had emphasized the mathematical strain of science, but, according to Dewey, "as the new science developed, the experimental necessity for sense data and verification reduced the role of logical and mathematical conceptions from a primary to a secondary rank" (p. 57). Science, as Dewey construed it, was not a method for revealing the properties of antecedent realities, but a process of critical intelligence whereby individuals interacted with and reconstructed their worlds. Dewey thus placed his faith in the scientific method, but he was nevertheless critical of any faith which believed the truth to be universal and obtainable by only one means. He was therefore critical of a faith which associated ideals with a transcendent Being, for, as he put it in *A Common Faith*, "the ideal itself has roots in natural conditions. . . ." ¹⁵ Dewey believed "in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperated human endeavor" (*Faith*, p. 26). This, he said, would be more religious in quality than any faith in a completed revelation.

In Dewey's view, no subject should be sacrosanct. It is only the method of science that merits our allegiance—"a method of changing beliefs by means of tested inquiry as well as of arriving at them." He interpreted the conflict between science and religion as ultimately "a conflict between allegiance to this method and allegiance to even an irreducible minimum of belief so fixed in advance that it can never be modified" (*Faith*, p. 39). Herein lay the major disagreement between Dewey and Meiklejohn. While Meiklejohn agreed with Dewey that there was no one way to the truth, Meiklejohn believed in immutable truths and in the human ability to uncover them. In contrast, to Dewey truth was a property of ideas, and ideas, in turn, were plans for action as constructed by human intellect. While things and perhaps mental states existed, they were neither true nor false. As Sidney Hook explained it, "whenever a thing is called true or real, it is the result of some judgment about it, some way of acting toward it, which has established itself as reliable and trustworthy. . . ." ¹⁶

While Meiklejohn admonished all of us to search for “the forms of unity which must be there if we can think at all,”¹⁷ in Dewey’s view “logical forms do not exist . . . in consciousness, nor in self, nor in a Platonic heaven. They arise in the course of inquiry and are used as instruments to further inquiry.”¹⁸ While unity was also Dewey’s goal, he believed that there were no prior ideas or forms. Ideas were plans for action, reflective responses to particular situations. “They are not,” explained Hook, “a kind of stuff—, physical, mental, or neutral.”¹⁹ And if ideas had no prior substantive existence, then neither was the mind an entity distinct from the body. While Meiklejohn accepted Plato’s dualistic concept of humanity, Dewey not only rejected such a view, but in fact condemned it as the major obstacle to overcome in developing a critical intelligence. According to Meiklejohn, “there is the external man of action and the inner man of reflection. Man is paradoxical, two men in one, the one controlling and the other controlled; the one acting, the other criticizing the action.”²⁰ In contrast, Dewey emphasized the continuity of nature, the essential unity of body, society, and mind.

At first glance, Dewey and Meiklejohn may seem to have shared similar political views. A closer look, however, reveals subtle but important differences. Both opposed tyranny and championed freedom and democracy, but their concepts of freedom and democracy differed significantly. For Meiklejohn, democracy meant “the art of thinking independently together.”²¹ Using Rousseau’s concept of the “general will” as a kind of secular substitute for the debunked religious tradition, Meiklejohn asserted that a genuine democracy is not chaotic, not a society without a pattern of culture. A democracy is, he argued, a society whose general will is the most difficult, the most complicated, the most sublime to create and understand.²² In a democracy each individual must be free, but freedom is not the sum total of each individual’s private search for truth. Freedom, according to Meiklejohn, would be achieved as individuals come to share a common vision and to struggle in unison for a commonly held ideal. Once again, Meiklejohn was attempting to have his cake and eat it too. Though he was more liberal and flexible than most classicists, his use of Rousseau’s “general will” as a secular substitute for the debunked religious tradition “exhibits,” as Schneider put it, “his nostalgia for dogmatic faith.”²³

For Meiklejohn, the modern task was to discover and pay homage to a transcendent democratic general will or pattern of culture. In contrast, Dewey counseled that we should reject such authoritarian philosophies in favor of the scientific method. As he saw it, “the

very heart of political democracy is adjudication of social differences by discussion and exchange of views."²⁴ Emerging out of such discussions would be the ideas, the plans for action, the hypotheses for confronting problems that spring from the common experiences of the group. Dewey construed democracy as individuals working together scientifically, not proceeding in accordance with some antecedent reality or immutable truth, but striving in the most reasonable way to improve the quality of life for all in the here and now.

Both Dewey and Meiklejohn claimed to be legitimate heirs to the Socratic tradition. Both took as their aim the development of a critical intelligence, though their concepts of intelligence differed significantly. For Dewey, the use of the critical intelligence meant applying the scientific method to all of life's problems in a uniquely human effort to build a better world. For Meiklejohn, it meant searching for, and living in accordance with, the universal forms which characterized the general will of the ideal democratic society. While both emphasized process rather than content, for Meiklejohn process implied an elusive means to a substantive, universal ideal. Though his life was spent in search of increasingly better ways of knowing the universal ideals or truths, he never doubted the existence of such truths. To Dewey, however, the ideal was itself procedural, the universe not static but continually evolving. By using the critical intelligence, i.e., the scientific method, Dewey believed that we could reconstruct the evolutionary process so as to improve human experience.

Though both Dewey and Meiklejohn were genuinely concerned about democracy, freedom, and human intelligence, they were different breeds of thinkers. Despite their points of convergence, there were fundamental and irreconcilable differences. Dewey understood these conceptual differences and their implications for education and society. Meiklejohn thought that their similarities offered the possibility of bridging the chasm between the two worlds. Though his efforts were magnanimous, he failed, because, as Paul R. Hiesel reminded those two combatants in 1945, "no man can serve two masters."²⁵

Today, though most of the actors in this drama are gone, the conflict has been revived. Mortimer J. Adler, an associate of Robert M. Hutchins and the only major survivor of the earlier debate, is again vigorously promoting the classicists' position. Adler has put forth numerous articles supporting the classicist cause, but none more forcibly outlines the major theme than his "Everybody's Business," written in 1979. At that time, he reiterated his modified Aristotelian position that a "basic and common schooling . . . should be

given to all without exception’’²⁶ and adhered to the Aristotelian notion that all people by nature desire to know and have the inherent potential to be actualized as rational human beings. Their inherent rational potential needs nurturing, which is best achieved by humanistic or philosophic learning, or, in Adler’s words, “the learning of the generalist, which is everybody’s business” (p. 2).

Philosophic or humanistic learning offers the kind of education everybody needs because such content appeals to the common experience of humanity. It serves as a catalyst, stimulating each individual’s rational powers to reflect upon universal problems. In this way it is possible for each individual to glean at least glimpses of the immutable truths of the universe. Using the content of the greatest literary and philosophical works, each human being can become liberated to the degree that he or she discovers universal truths. According to Adler,

the core of common experience is the universal experience that is the same for all human beings at all times and places. Some parts of common experience may vary with the circumstances of particular environments or the particular times, but there is always a common core that is universal—the same at all times and places regardless of circumstances (p. 11).

That statement—along with Adler’s reaffirmation, in *The Paideia Proposal*, of Hutchins’s belief that the best education is the best education for all—demonstrates that Adler has no interest in a truce with the experimentalists or followers of John Dewey. *The Paideia Proposal* is essentially an Aristotelian or classical blueprint for educational reform. While Adler “improves” upon Aristotle by asserting that everyone has the potential to learn and benefit from a basic common core of knowledge, his proposed educational reform is grounded in the classical view. He does suggest that students be allowed to progress at their own speed through the common core, but the goal of understanding and appreciating the universal truths is the same for all. Though Adler dedicates *The Paideia Proposal* to Dewey (along with Mann and Hutchins), his book is not addressed to the serious student of John Dewey. It is a political document designed to persuade school board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents to adopt a classical educational program. Simply but eloquently *The Paideia Proposal* makes the classicists’ case for a traditional education in service of a democratic ideal.

Adler and other classicists consider themselves to be heirs to the Socratic tradition. To his credit, Adler’s proposal emphasizes the importance of active discussions of the great books and other prod-

ucts of human artistry. Such teaching, he explains, “helps students to raise their minds up from a state of understanding or appreciating less to a state of understanding or appreciating more.”²⁷ Still, one wonders whether Adler and the other classicists are accurately representing the Socratic tradition. Like Hutchins and Meiklejohn, Adler is confident that through the “maieutic” approach, students will come to know and appreciate the immutable truths. To the degree that the educational goal is to assist students in uncovering and accepting such truths, this approach is more akin to sophisticated indoctrination than to genuine Socratic dialogue. Hutchins, Meiklejohn, and Adler are more accurately followers of Aristotle than of Socrates. Unlike the open inquiry of Socrates, the method of the classicists is authoritarian and dialectical. As Horace Kallen notes, their method, far from being that of the sciences of our day, is not even “the overall scrutiny, the careful observation, the free inquiry of Erasmus.”²⁸

Adler’s dedication of *The Paideia Proposal* to John Dewey may be his way of showing respect for a worthy opponent. More likely, it is his final attempt to persuade the average citizen that his traditional version of liberal education is what America needs. His proposal is Hutchins’s *Education for Freedom* revisited. Less strident than Hutchins, Adler lays out, in his simple yet eloquent language, the kind of education he believes a democracy requires. As someone who realizes that the chasm between the classicists and the experimentalists cannot be breached, Adler is not seeking a truce with an old adversary; unlike the mystical and sometimes naive Meiklejohn, he knows that an acceptable synthesis of the classicists’ and experimentalists’ position is neither desirable nor possible. Keenly aware of the current political climate, Adler is seizing this one last opportunity to mold America along classical lines. Having outlived his major antagonists, he has become one of the main architects of contemporary educational reform. While his dedication of *The Paideia Proposal* to Dewey is surprising and ironic, its warm reception in the 1980s is not.

Notes

1. Diane Ravitch, “The Proposal in Perspective,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 53 (November 1983), 383.
2. Abraham F. Citron, “Experimentalism and the Classicism of President Hutchins,” *Teachers College Record*, 44:8 (May 1943), 545.
3. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *Education for Freedom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943), p. 32.
4. John Dewey, “Challenge to Liberal Thought,” *Fortune*, 30:2 (August 1944), 157.

5. John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought* (New York: Peter Smith, 1910), p. 211.
6. John Dewey, "The Democratic Faith and Education," in *The Authoritarian Attempt to Capture Education* (Freeport, New York: Books for Library Press, 1945 and 1970), p. 7.
7. Carl Kaysen, ed., *Content and Context: Essays on College Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 54.
8. Alexander Meiklejohn, "Is Mental Training a Myth," *Educational Review*, 37 (February 1909), 138.
9. Alexander Meiklejohn, "A Reply to John Dewey," *Fortune*, 31:1 (January 1945), 207.
10. Herbert W. Schneider, "Review of Education Between Two Worlds," *Journal of Philosophy*, 39 (December 3, 1942), 69.
11. Hal G. Lewis, "Meiklejohn and Experimentalism," *Teachers College Record*, 44 (May 1943), 563.
12. Alexander Meiklejohn, *Education Between Two Worlds* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1972), pp. 111-112.
13. Sidney Hook, "Education for the New Order," *Nation*, 156 (February 27, 1943), 310.
14. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (New York: Minton, Balch, and Company, 1929), p. 55.
15. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 48.
16. Sidney Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1971), p. 78.
17. Alexander Meiklejohn, *Freedom and the College* (New York: The Century Company, 1923), p. 199.
18. Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait*, p. 93.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
20. Alexander Meiklejohn, "Educational Leadership in America," *Harpers*, 160 (March 1934), 445.
21. Alexander Meiklejohn, "Teachers and Controversial Questions," *Harpers*, 177 (June 1938), 19.
22. Alexander Meiklejohn, *Education Between Two Worlds*, p. 92.
23. Schneider, "A Review," p. 69.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
25. Paul R. Hesel, "Ideologies Motivating American Education," *The Personalist*, 26 (April 1945), 190.
26. Mortimer J. Adler, "Everybody's Business," in Seymour Fox, ed., *Philosophy for Education* (Jerusalem: The Van Leer Jerusalem Foundation, 1983), p. 2.
27. Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York: McMillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1982), p. 29.
28. Horace M. Kallen, "Of Humanistic Sources of Democracy," in Sidney Hook, ed., *American Philosophers at Work* (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968), p. 390.