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Dewey, Maritain & Australian education

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts the attitudes to science and philosophy of John Dewey and Jacques Maritain in the context of their indirect, but real, influence on education in Australia.

Keywords: Calvinism, humanism, Molinism, pragmatism, Thomism, constructivism, paternalism

Introduction

John Dewey (1859-1952) and Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) had indirect, but definite, influences on Australian education, the former more obviously than the latter. Australian education has, in turn, also had some influence on education in Asia, partly through the large number of Asian students who have received education in Australia since the 1950s, initially through the Colombo Plan. Many of these students have in turn assumed senior political roles in their home countries.

This paper looks at the similarities and differences between Dewey and Maritain and their corresponding strengths and weaknesses. At a superficial level, they had similarities in the way they dressed, their distinguished grey hair and moustache, their early twentieth century educational concerns. Though born on opposite sides of the Atlantic, they both lived in parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They were both prolific writers on much the same topics, but from very different perspectives. They were both interested in empirical science and philosophy, though Maritain began in the former, while Dewey began in the latter. They are the epitome of those modern educators who are concerned with science and philosophy.

Their mutual interest in empirical evidence is in contrast to those who currently talk about “the science” and for whom the narrative is more important than the evidence [cf. 5]. This widespread ignorance actually demonstrates that much of the work of Dewey ^[4] and Maritain ^[16] has failed in practice in high schools of the Western world ^[14].

As philosophers, Dewey was mainly a pragmatist and Maritain was mainly a Thomist. There was a common influence on Dewey and Maritain, namely Aristotle, and there are discernible effects of this in both men and their writings on recommendations for educators, particularly teachers in elementary and high schools ^[21]. Both were concerned with the purpose of education at all levels, and it is the aim of this paper to try to provoke more discussion on this fundamental point of discourse. Many reviews of education in recent years have commented on the curriculum (the what) and the cost (the how), but have avoided the purpose (the why): the foundations of education at any level [cf. 11]. We can infer from Figure 1 that with weak foundations we can get a weak building, though Dewey was generally a very clear writer, while Maritain was not always served well in translation, some of his books being mere transcriptions of his lectures!

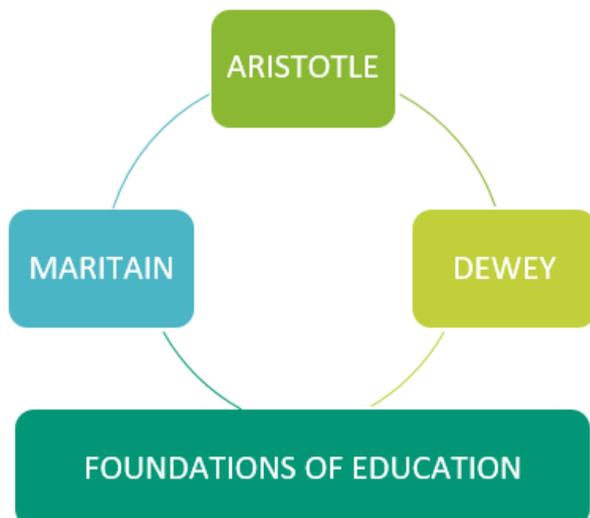


Fig 1: Influences in common

John Dewey

Who was John Dewey and why was he apparently so influential? Dewey (1859-1952) was an American philosopher of education whose pragmatic promotion of the practical over the abstract resonated with the spirit of his times. This was further emphasised and, to some extent, contradicted by his anti-utilitarian experimentalism, based on an excessive admiration for the experimental methods of the natural sciences which he wished to foster in the social sciences. In itself this is not necessarily bad, if kept within bounds, but Dewey compromised his pragmatism by his unrelenting passion for discrediting all that was traditional in education, particularly any religious influence ^[23]. This obsession obscured his original efforts to find more efficient ways for students to learn ^[27].

Dewey was born Bloomington, Vermont, USA. He graduated in 1879 from the University of Vermont; he did some school-teaching and then enrolled at the recently established Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore where he graduated with a PhD in 1884. Dewey was influenced by the leading exponent of Neo-Hegelianism, George Sylvester Morris. Dewey followed this with work at the Universities of Michigan (1884-1994); Chicago (1894-1904); Columbia (1904-1930); he became the founder of what came to be called “progressive education” ^[24]. In this he changed the focus of education from the institution to the student ^[22]: this was indeed an important progressive advance ^[4].

Over the years Dewey lectured and advised educational systems throughout the USA and in China, Japan, Mexico, Turkey and the Soviet Union; he also influenced Australian educational leaders who studied for their doctorates in the USA at a time when Australian universities did not offer the *Doctor of Philosophy* degree and more generally from visits to Australia of members of the New Education Fellowship ^[2]. Moreover, the pragmatism of Dewey was still very much in vogue in teacher training in Australia in the post-World War II years ^[3].

Dewey’s discussion of the complete act of thought, or problem solving according to the scientific method, is very useful in transforming learning into an active process of intelligence, particularly through collaborative learning. This was at the heart of the big Australian curriculum projects at the Australian Council for Educational Research in the sixties and seventies, such as the Junior Secondary Science Project

[e.g., 25], when Dr Bill Radford was Director of ACER. Like Dewey, Maritain championed the need for strong philosophical foundations of education, but Dewey abandoned earlier philosophy in favour of evolutionary biology or racial recapitulation which gradually changed into a theory of education which he called “immediate empiricism”, based on the pragmatism of William James (1842-1910). We note that Maritain himself also seemed at time to be a Christian empiricist. Edmondson ^[6], a professor of public administration from Georgia, took aim at the patron saint of pragmatism in education in order to knock him off his pedestal. ‘Deweyism’ has been around for a long time, as it is today, though not all of education’s ills can be laid at the feet of John Dewey, and some of the educational ills that Edmondson identifies are simply different. A danger of an over-emphasis on instrumental thinking can be a underplaying of speculative, poetical, musical and contemplative thinking.

Dewey was a prolific writer and, curiously, many of his books touched on issues in the writings of Jacques Maritain, another philosopher and former scientist, who understood the nature and limitations of the experimental sciences. Maritain pointed out the ambiguities and disastrous confusion of ideas in Dewey’s writings. Dewey seemed to caricature the Aristotelian idea of the learner as the active agent in education, an idea which he acquired in his earlier study of philosophy. One of the problems with this is correctly identified by Edmondson as disregard for history -- not only formal study of the subject, but also history as part of the intellectual framework of any discipline. Many of our own students are a-historical in their outlook on their studies and on life. Despite this, his emphasis on the student as the active agent in learning and the community role of the school touched the hearts of his readers and listeners. This influence as a Professor at Columbia and Chicago was profound, widespread and long-lasting.

Dewey however, like Hume and Kant, denied the principle of causality. A cause of confusion with most of the “-isms” since the Enlightenment has been a naïve understanding of the nature and scope of causality. At one level we see this when people confuse causation with correlated, coincidental or even consecutive events, thus failing to appreciate that correlated events can be different effects of a common cause. Scientists can even be confused when they fail to distinguish the formal causality of mathematics with the efficient causality of experimental science, which can sometimes fortuitously result in the correct formula for the wrong reasons ^[12, 13].

Jacques Maritain

Maritain was born and died in France, but lived in the USA prior to and during the Second World War and went on lecture tours there many times between the World Wars. Maritain was educated at the Sorbonne where he met his Russian wife, Raissa (1883-1960), a poetess; their life together (1904-1960) is described in two of her books: *We Have Been Friends Together* ^[17] and *Adventures in Grace* ^[18]. Moore ^[20] considers the mutual intellectual effects and affects of the two Maritains.

Maritain studied science (biology) first, and then philosophy, in which he was very much influenced by the lectures and writings of Henri Bergson, Leon Bloy and Rev. Dr Herbert Clerissac *op*, who introduced him to the writings of St Thomas Aquinas. The latter was a major influence in his

development of the idea of what he called 'True Humanism'. In the middle-ages, for instance, a human was recognized as a person: "a unity of a spiritual nature, endowed with freedom of choice, wounded in nature, made for a spiritual end" [15]. The middle-ages affirmed the reality of the human will. Then, through the influence of the philosophy of Descartes, "although much progress has been made the misfortune of modern history is that all this progress has been directed by a spirit of anthropocentrism, by a naturalistic conception of man, and a Calvinist or Molinist conception of grace and freedom". Luis de Molina, a Jesuit, and John Calvin (or Jean Cauvin), a Protestant Reformer, were two sixteenth century theologians concerned with issues of faith and free will in renaissance humanism.

The proposed remedy for this warped humanism is a "true humanism" which tends to make man truly more human because it respects the rights of the human person as a person and not merely as an individual. This does not mean a reversion to the humanism of medieval Christendom. The present era demands a society which is "vitality Christian rather than decoratively so". To this end, Jacques emphasized the need for pluralism and personalism. Pluralism is demanded by the variety and diversity of the modern world. Likewise, without fitting respect for personality, as distinct from individuality, the modern world cannot function.

Jacques saw the acceptance of a true philosophy of knowledge (epistemology) as one of the fundamental solutions to the spirit of anthropocentric humanism. "This conquest of being, this progressive attainment of new truths, or the progressive realization of the ever-growing and ever-renewed significance of truths already attained, opens and enlarges our mind and life, and really situates them in freedom and autonomy [16:p.12].

The Maritains' long study of mysticism and poetry made them aware of the inadequacies of language, and it is partly this, and partly Jacques' pedagogic instincts which make him return again and again to the same themes, such as the interplay of freedom and authority, man and the state, science and religion, faith and reason, grace and nature. Jacques was in great demand as a speaker, even though he underestimated his gifts in that regard. It was this ability, as well as the fame of his writings, which led to invitations to visit America in the 1920s.

During these trips he continued to analyse free will. Out of this grew his belief in the excellence and worth of the temporal common good (as distinct from the public good). The common good of society requires that political society should have a hierarchical structure, but, at the same time, authority must be exercised for the sake of people. Jacques believed that the American ideal of government of the people, by the people and for the people was meaningless if the people were intellectually undeveloped: hence the enormous importance of genuine education.

In education, as elsewhere, Jacques emphasized freedom, but not the licence of unbridled freedom. Individuals, and nations too for that matter, can become intolerable dictators if their assertion of freedom degenerates into mere licence, as when they ignore the rights of others or their own responsibilities, or when they refuse to give to others the tolerance they demand for themselves. He espoused a liberal education requiring discipline and bending and shaping, but not moulding. Which is why we need teachers who are at ease with themselves as people and who respect the spiritual dynamism and the mysterious identity within each student.

These visits were to continue until 1938, when they also visited Argentina and Brazil (where there had been a Jacques Maritain Centre in Rio de Janeiro since 1925). At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the French Ministry of Cultural Relations urged Jacques to carry out his planned schedule of lectures in North America: he was of more value to France as a symbol and source of encouragement than as a possible prisoner (particularly with a Jewish wife) in Europe. Thus, the war years were spent in exile in the USA, where, in addition to his lecturing and writing, Jacques helped to found the Ecole Libre des Hautes Etudes, a university-in-exile in New York. This was done with Jacques Hadamard, the famous mathematician. Much of the material produced in these years was widely distributed by underground groups in France to sustain resistance to the Nazi invaders and their puppet regime.

As soon as the USA entered the war, Jacques began regular broadcasts to France. By 1942 his effect on French morale was so great that General de Gaulle invited him to join the National Committee for Free France. Moved by natural compassion, as well as the love of his friends and his knowledge of the cultural heritage of Raissa and her sister, Vera, Jacques made many attacks in his broadcasts on anti-Semitism. Many of his broadcasts were also on the theme of fraternal unity, and it was bitter disappointment when he returned to France at the end of the war to see how little there was of it. Perhaps this is why he felt that he could no longer ignore the plea of General de Gaulle to enter public life.

Maritain joined the French diplomatic service, serving as President of the French delegation to UNESCO and French Ambassador to the Vatican, where his counterpart, the Vatican Nuncio to France was Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, the Future Pope St John XXIII. The Vatican Secretary of State at the time was Monsignor Giovanni Montini, the future Pope St Paul VI. Both Popes used Jacques' ideas in their encyclicals on social justice. Maritain's ambassadorial duties were very demanding in that era of post-war reconstruction and resettlement of refugees, and the time he had to give to these was at the expense of the reading and reflection which had previously characterized his life. Nevertheless, many of his wartime writings were published during this period and his landmark, *Education at the Crossroads*, was more widely disseminated.

Educational Foundations

St Thomas Aquinas in a sense Christianized the writings of Aristotle [20: 38-59]. Both Dewey and Maritain were advocates of uncommon common sense, but "since the modern world began in the sixteenth century, nobody's system of philosophy has really corresponded to everybody's system of reality; to what if left to themselves, common men would call common sense" [1: 144]. Furthermore, the relevance of Thomism and pragmatism to the humanism of philosophy since the time of Descartes make their combination a particularly incisive tool when dealing with the foundations of education.

The foundations of education are broad. "They are concerned with social and individual purposes. They address cultural and cognitive aspects of life. That breadth has been lost in recent educational debate Decisions about curriculum must flow from understandings of purpose" [19, 1]: "education is a process beginning with birth and ending-or perhaps beginning again - with death" [9, 89]). If we are not to enter a new dark age, then the intellectual values of schooling need

to be restored (Miller ^[19]). It was through Barry Miller, an engineer turned philosopher, that many of Maritain's ideas were transmitted to teacher education students at the University of New England in Armidale (NSW) where he was a Professor of Philosophy (and a Member of the Institute of Engineers, Australia!). This was at a time when UNE's pioneering distance education programs run by Howard Sheath, a former army officer, and first Director of External Studies at an Australian university which equated the external with the on campus internal studies, and which attracted very many high school teachers from around Australia.

Much of educational philosophy in Australia has had a blue-print approach to philosophy ^[22]; echoes of Dewey ^[8]. The major influence in turning Miller from an engineer into a philosopher was Rev. Dr Austin Woodbury, a Marist priest, and founder of the Aquinas Academy in Sydney, which taught many Australian school teachers and educational administrators about Thomism in general, and Maritain in particular ^[28].

Furthermore, in relation to the curriculum, Maritain and Dewey had contrasting views. For Dewey, doing what is needed to solve an immediate problem arising in experience provides the intellectual skills and methodology for the future. For Maritain, a student's progress through the curriculum is a series of preparatory stages. Each stage has its own powers, but it is only one long search for truth. Thus, Maritain sees the physical sciences as liberal arts rather than applied technical studies ^[24].

Finally, Dewey and Maritain are linked, not only in that they tackled similar issues from different viewpoints, but also in that in 1950 they were both Honorary Chairmen of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, together with Bertrand Russell, Benedetto Croce and Karl Jaspers. Maritain argued that his moral philosophy was distinct from theology, but Watson ^[29, 164] argues that "It is dependent on principles received from faith, and is in fact theology". Maritain, like Dewey, defines things in terms of their formal objects: either what an object is or how the object is known. With the latter, he would distinguish his moral philosophy from moral theology. This way of definition and distinction transcends our discussion here, but is integral and essential in definitions in education, and is missing in recent reviews of education ^[26].

Progressive Education and Perennial Values

Dewey cannot be blamed entirely for Deweyism. He was no intellectual lightweight: he could see through the so-called "playway" approach in which activity seems to replace thought rather than stimulates thought. Thus, the current Deweyist fad of constructivism in curriculum development attempts to pattern a student's learning after the manner in which the student constructs his or her "own reality". This is an example of the triumph of ideology over ideas. While there are no shortcuts to analytic and reasoning skills: critical thinking only comes with a well-trained mind ^[15]. For example, our own view is that when a grounding in Euclid was abandoned in mathematics we threw the baby out with the bath water. The problem was not with Euclid but how geometry was envisaged ^[9].

One can argue for parental participation in schooling -- not in the paternalism that Dewey inspires -- but rather in a principled recognition of the primacy of the parental role. This leads to a consideration of what "public" should mean in education. If we are speaking of "quality education" as a

public good, "public" here should refer to society and not just to government. Thus, in Australia transport and health are a public mixture of government and private enterprise, but education is public (government) and private at the nominal level, but a mixture in practice.

"An analysis of the divergent insights on education presented by Maritain and Dewey can help educators step back and reflect on their work. These two thinkers' voices have a relevance that continues to speak to us about the problems of education" ^[7]. As with many differences in education, it is more a case of 'both-and' rather than 'either-or' as suggested earlier in Figure 1: progressive and perennial!

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