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Scapegoat: John Dewey and the character education crisis

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Many conservatives, including some conservative scholars, blame the ideas and influence of John Dewey for what has frequently been called a crisis of character, a catastrophic decline in moral behavior in the schools and society of North America. Dewey's critics claim that he is responsible for the undermining of the kinds of instruction that could lead to the development of character and the strengthening of the will, and that his educational philosophy and example exert a ubiquitous and disastrous influence on students' conceptions of moral behavior. This article sets forth the views of some of these critics and juxtaposes them with what Dewey actually believed and wrote regarding character education. The juxtaposition demonstrates that Dewey neither called for nor exemplified the kinds of character-eroding pedagogy his critics accuse him of championing; in addition, this paper highlights the ways in which Dewey argued consistently and convincingly that the pedagogical approaches advocated by his critics are the real culprits in the decline of character and moral education.

Keywords: moral education, character education, moral behavior, pedagogy, character, educational philosophy

Violence, bullying and antisocial behavior seem to have reached epidemic proportions in the schools and on the streets of the United States (US) (Akiba, LeTendre, Baker, & Goesling, 2002; Brooks, 2011; Leming, 1996; Males, 2001; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Smagorinsky, 2002; Snyder et al., 2010; Tendero, 2000). Various observers (see for example McDonnell, 2008; Noonan, 2012) refer to the present state of affairs as a 'crisis of character'. Hunter (2000) explains that the word *crisis* 'derived from the field of pathology in which it was understood as "a critical point in the development of a disease"' (p. 79). Given that understanding, Hunter doubts that there is, presently, a crisis of character in the US. From his perspective, if there ever was such a decisive moment, it occurred long ago, perhaps toward the end of the nineteenth century, after which the patient died. For 'character', says Hunter (2000, p. xiii), 'is dead'.

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Determining the cause of death is no easy matter. According to Hunter (2000), for example, character's demise cannot simply be attributed to individual moral failure, however widespread, for 'there are … larger historical forces at work' (p. xiv) including 'multinational capitalism, … pluralism and social mobility, … [and] the contemporary communications media and popular culture' (p. xiv). Although Hunter (2000) seems to cherish some hope that character may be resuscitated, in light of these complex forces he concludes that 'there is something about the historical unfolding of [American] moral culture that resists all … efforts to … oppose it' (p. 79). Indeed, he writes that 'no amount of political rhetoric, legal maneuvering, educational policy-making, or money' (p. xiii) will soon be able to restore 'character as a common feature within American society and a common trait of its people' (p. xiii).

Given the plethora of character's enemies and the disease's stubborn resistance, one would think that identifying a single cause and a simple cure would be all but impossible. When faced with bewildering catastrophes, however, people crave straightforward explanations and easy remedies, often leading to the identification of a solitary villain, someone to blame, a scapegoat. According to Girard (1986), even when a disaster is irreducibly complex, victims and observers tend to 'convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society' (p. 15). In keeping with Girard's (1986) observations, many conservatives have determined that John Dewey is responsible for the entire complex of character-related problems in the US.

In this article, I juxtapose some of the specific accusations leveled against Dewey with what Dewey actually wrote, thus revealing both that his critics are wrong to blame him for a crisis of character in the US and that he is a terribly uncooperative, argumentative scapegoat. I begin by demonstrating that relatively powerful conservative voices both in and outside of the academy have laid the blame for the crisis of character at Dewey's doorstep. I then rebut, in turn, three of the critics' particular accusations: first, that Dewey sought to weaken students' wills in the face of difficulty and temptation; second, that Dewey sought to minimize the influence of mature adults who could facilitate and perhaps even ensure character development in the young; and third, that Dewey sought to prevent students from studying and learning the academic content peculiar to each discipline, thus undermining discipline in general. Following these rebuttals, I present Dewey's counterargument that the approaches to teaching advocated by so many of his critics are the chief impediments to education in character. I then discuss two potential reasons why the critics have chosen Dewey as their scapegoat: first, their erroneous belief that, although Dewey might have been something of a champion of character early in his career, he later abandoned the concept; and second, their mistaken identification of Dewey's rejection of religion with a rejection of, even an antipathy toward, the development of character.

We turn first to what at least appears to be a conservative certainty: that Dewey is to blame for a crisis of character.

A presumption of guilt

According to Laats (2012), although there is no single, conservative viewpoint with regard to what ails public education in America, virtually all 'conservative revisionists … lambaste the pernicious influence of John Dewey' (p. 6), arguing that he 'took over and destroyed American schools' (p. 3). Not only is there near unanimity among conservatives that Dewey is to blame, but Laats (2012) also reports similar agreement regarding Dewey's strategy for destroying American education: many conservatives charge that he did it by attacking 'its roots as a thoroughly Christian and Protestant institution' (p. 3). As Apple (2006) has noted, although a variety of conservative groups have opposed progressive approaches to teaching and learning, 'the sheer number and range of these protests by religious conservatives exceed those by all other groups' (p. 136). Apple (2006) identifies a number of conservative, religious groups that exert nationwide influence (e.g. Citizens for Excellence in Education, the American Family Association and Focus on the Family); these groups, writes Apple (2006), believe Dewey's influence to be 'evil' (p. 136) and argue that Dewey has 'led schools astray' (p. 137).

Many such groups are more political and pastoral than they are scholarly, but conservative scholars have also blamed Dewey for the character crisis in the US. For example, Murphy (2005, p. 285) alleges that

> Dewey could be considered singularly responsible for the dramatic change in schools … from the character-promoting mission of American education established in colonial days to the current situation in which violence, unethical behavior and disrespect toward others [run] rampant not only in our schools but also in our society.

As we have seen, Hunter (2000) shares Murray's bleak assessment of the state of character education; and despite both his understanding that the nation's sense of moral crisis predates Dewey by centuries—'it was as urgent in the seventeenth century as it is today' (p. 77)—and his recognition of the complexity of the problems, he also shares Murphy's (2005) opinion that Dewey may be primarily responsible. In Hunter's (2000) view, Dewey's ideas have been central to the undermining of 'such qualities as promptness, truthfulness, courtesy, and obedience and industry' (p. 60), which, prior to 'Dewey's innovations' (p. 60), had 'occupied an uncontested, quasi-sacred place in mainstream public discourse and social life' (p. 60). Edmundson (2006) also writes that character education is a 'straightforward task' (p. 27), but that educators struggle with it because of Dewey's 'devaluation of character education' (p. 27). More specifically, Edmundson (2006) claims that Dewey devalues character education in part by '[eliminating] the "will" from any meaningful role in moral development' (p. 26). As we shall now see, Edmundson (2006) is not alone in leveling this charge.

Accusation #1: Dewey seeks to weaken students' wills

In fact, many other critics (see for example Hirsch, 1987; Kirk, 1985; Lockerbie, 1994; O'Hear, 1991) accuse Dewey of devotedly following Rousseau toward a

free-wheeling child-centeredness without will, discipline or direction, which has led to a demonstrable and devastating collapse of character in the schools. Kliebard (2002) convincingly rebuts the charge that Dewey is Rousseau's disciple: indeed, whether writing with his daughter (Dewey & Dewey, 1915) or on his own, Dewey at times compliments Rousseau and at other times takes him severely to task. For example, he (Dewey, 1916/1944) calls Rousseau's idea that children's faculties develop spontaneously 'pure mythology' (p. 114) and writes that Rousseau's reliance upon 'random and capricious exercise' (p. 114) is 'profoundly wrong' (p. 114). These are not the words of a sycophantic disciple.

Dewey's straightforward statement regarding the error of reliance upon caprice notwithstanding, he is frequently accused of advocating just such an approach. For example, according to Braley (1986), Dewey wants to 'set Johnny free to "blossom"' (p. 96) unhindered, and O'Hear (1991) charges that children in a 'Dewey-esque' (p. 27) school flit from one thing to another 'as the whim takes them' (p. 18), driven not by (or toward) discipline but by fleeting impulses and interests.

Interest does play a central role in Dewey's thinking; indeed, he anticipates by many decades the findings of psychologists with regard to interest's key role in learning (see for example Hidi, 1990, 2006). Contrary to his critics' assertions, however, Dewey's definition of *interest* is hardly synonymous with *whim*. For example, Dewey (1897/1964b) identifies 'interests' with 'dawning capacities' (p. 436). If these incipient capabilities are to be developed, he (Dewey, 1903) writes, educators must not simply let children run wild, for the development of interest 'involves seriousness, absorption, definiteness of purpose, and results in formation of steadiness and persistent habit in the service of worthy ends' (p. 12). Edmundson (2006) and Braley (1986) want us to believe that Dewey seeks to undermine students' will to work, but note Dewey's words again: *seriousness*, *absorption*, *definiteness of purpose*, *steadiness*, *persistent habit*—those are willful, character-related words that would hardly be in the vocabulary of someone who '[de-emphasizes] the work-ethic' (Braley, 1986, p. 96) or who seeks to eliminate the will from moral development, as Edmundson (2006) claims. Indeed, Dewey calls for a renewed focus on students' interests not because he seeks to weaken students' wills or undermine their character, but because he is determined to strengthen them. He (Dewey, 1903, p. 32; emphasis in original) writes,

> Because interests are something that have to be *worked out* in life and not merely indulged in themselves, there is plenty of room for difficulties and obstacles which have to be overcome, and whose overcoming forms "will" and develops the flexible and firm fiber of character.

Still, Edmundson (2006) is convinced that Dewey's goal is to allow children to follow impulsive interests without having to work out any difficulties or to overcome any obstacles; he (Edmundson, 2006) claims that, from Dewey's perspective, 'education cannot progress if impulses are "snubbed"' (p. 33). However, Dewey's (1922) view is that 'educative growth' (p. 141) can occur only if an impulse is indeed 'snubbed' (p. 141) or 'blocked' (p. 141): when a child's impulse toward an

interesting pursuit is blocked by obstacles inherent in the situation, 'the snubbed impulse … will become a contributory factor in some more inclusive and complex activity, in which it is reduced to a subordinate and yet effectual place' (p. 141). In this way, Dewey's definition of educative conditions emphasizes both the impulses inherent in the student and the obstacles to those impulses inherent in the work the student must do in order to achieve the desired end. The working out of problems and obstacles as the student pursues essential interests causes growth, develops character and strengthens the will.

Thus, when Dewey emphasizes the importance of a child's interest and impulse, he is not countenancing random pursuits or calling for laissez-faire instruction. Instead, he (Dewey, 1903) is prioritizing a student's need to feel a deep connection to a worthy aim, a goal that has not been imposed from without, apart from his life and experience. For when a student pursues an interest in the service of a 'worthy end' (p. 12), the attendant 'difficulties are … intrinsic; they are significant; their meaning is appreciated because they are felt in relation to the impulse … to whose outworking they are relevant' (p. 32). For Dewey (1916/1944), the essence of education is 'vital energy seeking opportunity for effective exercise' (p. 72), and effective exercise requires both that students' interests be engaged and that those vital energies be opposed, blocked by the difficulties intrinsic to the worthy end.

It is important to note that some of Dewey's critics assume that his notion of a worthy end does not include behaviors and attitudes generally considered virtuous. For example, Kirk (1985) claims that Dewey makes the satisfaction of physical desire the entire aim of life and of schooling, and Edmundson (2006) accuses Dewey of failing to distinguish between virtue and vice. Similarly, O'Hear (1991) writes that, for Dewey, 'any experience is valuable in itself whatever its form or content' (p. 20) and argues that Dewey fails to teach students 'which things are good and which actions noble—a knowledge of the content of morality' (p. 22). These allegations, however, are groundless.

Far from valuing all experiences equally, whatever their content, Dewey (1938/1963) believes that 'not … all experiences are genuinely or equally educative' (p. 25) and that 'some experiences are mis-educative' (p. 25), perhaps especially experiences in which students are encouraged to pursue fleeting whims apart from any difficulty or direction. By contrast, educative experiences strengthen the will and teach students to work together to overcome obstacles and to resist distractions. Dewey (1903) writes that the problem for the educator is how to recognize and utilize students' interests, their dawning capacities, 'so that there may grow out of them in due time such a sense of law and of the claims of law as to hold and reinforce character in critical periods of temptation' (p. 27). Are these the words of someone who seeks to disparage the development of character, to prioritize the satisfaction of appetites or to eliminate the will?

Accusation #2: Dewey minimizes the role of teachers in developing character

Still, Dewey's critics accuse him of arguing that the teacher's role is to get out of the way and to let children follow whatever temptation arises; Edmundson (2006) even claims that, from Dewey's perspective, to do anything else amounts to 'abuse' (p. 50). But Dewey's call for greater attention to students' interests, impulses and experiences is not a call for less authority or less engagement on the part of the teacher; in fact, he (Dewey, 1938/1963) writes that attending to children's dawning capacities 'may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others' (p. 21). Indeed, Dewey (1938/1963) criticizes so-called progressive schools that 'proceed as if any form of direction and guidance by adults were an invasion of individual freedom' (p. 22), for 'guidance given by the teacher to the exercise of the pupils' intelligence is an aid to freedom, not a restriction upon it' (p. 71).

Thus, far from believing that adult guidance amounts to abuse, Dewey (1926/1964) argues that those who seek to allow children absolute freedom 'are in a false position' (p. 153), however progressive they claim to be. His condemnation of educators who deny children direction or correction on the grounds that such interventions represent 'an unwarranted trespass upon … sacred intellectual individuality' (p. 153) is quite clear: 'Now such a method,' he writes, 'is really stupid' (p. 153). Nevertheless, Dewey is regularly accused of propagating the very idea he so roundly condemns. The reason, I think, is that he finds just as stupid the notion that a teacher can do all the work of character formation for the students. As Westbrook (1991, p. 107) notes, Dewey's

> critique of oppressive benevolence … indicated that the child had to develop this character for himself if education was to be truly moral. Teachers could not directly form a child's character for him, and, even if they could, that molding would not be ethical.

Indeed, Dewey (1916/1944) believes that 'we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment' (pp. 18–19). Some critics (see for example Edmundson, 2006; O'Hear, 1991), convinced that character must be taught directly, argue that Dewey's insistence on indirection is an abdication of responsibility to transmit common notions of character. However, Dewey values the transmission as much as his critics do. He (Dewey, 1916/1944) writes that adults must take pains 'to see that genuine and thorough transmission takes place' (p. 3), or else 'the most civilized group will relapse into barbarism and then into savagery' (pp. 3–4). Indeed, children cannot survive, let alone receive a transmission of character, 'without the guidance and succor of others' (p. 4). According to Westbrook (1991), teachers in the Dewey School aimed for a genuine transmission by educating indirectly, engaging students in collaborative, educative experiences and guiding them through intrinsic obstacles toward worthy ends. Westbrook (1991) cites observers of the School who note that, as a result of such engaging

indirection, students developed and displayed character qualities commonly held to be essential: cooperation, compromise, reflection and self-control.

Dewey's critics want teachers to impart character directly (that is, equating *teaching* with *telling*), but Dewey (1916/1944) is convinced that necessary attitudes and character traits cannot be transmitted by 'direct contagion or literal inculcation' (p. 11). From his perspective, 'beliefs and aspirations cannot be physically extracted and inserted' (p. 11); they cannot be 'hammered in … [or] plastered on' (p. 11). Thus, while O'Hear (1991) wants 'to restore the traditional conception of the teacher as an authority, with knowledge to impart to uneducated minds' (p. 18) and Breese (1990) touts 'the lecture method, whereby the mind of the teacher simply communicates with the mind of the student' (p. 167), Dewey (1934/1964) insists that students are not like empty phonographic records waiting to be inscribed with information and attitudes so that they can faithfully replay what has been written upon them 'when the proper button is pushed' (p. 6) in an examination, on the playground or on the street corner.

Accusation #3: Dewey depreciates content knowledge

When Dewey argues that teachers cannot hammer information and attitudes into students, his critics often reply that he advocates an education not only without teachers but also without content. For example, O'Hear (1991) claims that Dewey is indifferent to the moral and academic content of instruction and Nash (1990) writes that Dewey's preferred approach to instruction is 'content-less' (p. 50). However, Dewey's own laboratory school was hardly an experiment in content-less meandering (see for example Mayhew & Edwards, 1936). As Westbrook (1991) notes, Dewey 'valued mankind's accumulated knowledge as much as the most hidebound traditionalist, and he intended that the children in his elementary school would be introduced to the riches of science, history, and the arts' (p. 104). The school's curricular goals were explicitly stated and obviously intended to help children 'to learn to read, to write, to count, to think scientifically, and to express themselves aesthetically' (p. 104). Westbrook (1991) concludes that, as far as subject matter was concerned, Dewey's goals were 'rather conventional …. Only his methods were innovative and radical' (p. 104). And those methods, radical though they might have been, did not include allowing children to run wild. Indeed, Westbrook (1991, p. 108) writes,

> Dewey's educational theory was far less child-centred and more teacher-centred than is often supposed. His confidence that children would develop a democratic character in the schools he envisioned was rooted less in a faith in the "spontaneous and crude capacities of the child" than in the ability of teachers to create an environment in the classroom.

For Dewey, an educative environment is, by definition, subject-matter rich, including both academic content and what might be called character content (the development of personal discipline, the strengthening of the will, a commitment to

honesty and justice and so on). In using the term *character content*, I do not meant to suggest that Dewey approaches the development of character the way so many character education programs do, with definitions of key concepts established a priori and solutions to moral dilemmas prefabricated for students. As Pappas (2008) has noted, however, neither is Dewey a subjectivist, uninterested in definitions and common understandings of virtue: for Dewey, morality is neither arbitrary nor representative of 'an antecedent morality' (p. 138). Instead, writes Pappas (2008), 'moral judgments are ultimately grounded in the standards of a community'(p. 138). When the community works together to solve vital problems, they draw upon and develop both academic content knowledge and character content knowledge, for they must jointly work out both mathematical and interpersonal puzzles; they must as a community exercise both investigative and communicative skills; and they must together decide how to proceed both scientifically and justly. Thus, from Dewey's (1938/1963) perspective, the development of mind and the development of character are complementary, contiguous processes: an educative environment brings students together to answer important questions and, in the course of pursuing those answers collaboratively, students learn both traditional, academic subject matter and how to behave, how to get along, how to discipline themselves for the sake of the common good. Dewey (1916/1944, p.129) writes that

> a person who is trained to consider his actions, to undertake them deliberately, is in so far forth disciplined. Add to this ability a power to endure in an intelligently chosen course in face of distraction, confusion, and difficulty, and you have the essence of discipline. Discipline means power at command; mastery of the resources available for carrying through the action undertaken.

Thus Dewey emphasizes the centrality of academic and moral resources to the development of personal discipline; what he is after is the power both to maintain momentum in spite of distraction and to choose the direction of that momentum intelligently, based on serious, committed study of available resources. All of this requires and contributes to the development of both character and of academic knowledge.

Far from being indifferent to or hostile to content, Dewey (1916/1944) argues that the teacher's job is 'to organize education so that natural active tendencies shall be fully enlisted in doing something, while seeing to it that the doing requires observation, the acquisition of information, and the use of a constructive imagination' (p. 137). For Dewey, it is not enough simply to acquire information; nor is it enough to demand obedience or to enforce restraint. An educative environment calls forth the interest of the student in the problem at hand, foregrounds the academic information needed to attack the problem, develops the student's powers of observation and decision, strengthens the student's will as obstacles are confronted and overcome, and rewards the exercise of character and virtue as students work reliably together to solve the problems before them. This sort of experience, says Dewey (1916/1944), is what is most needed 'to improve social conditions' (p. 137),

for having learned to treat one another with honesty, fairness and respect in the pursuit of a common goal in school, students are more likely to strive for such healthy, democratic relationships in the larger society as well. The sort of experience that is least likely to promote academic and moral growth, from Dewey's perspective, is the experience that so many of his critics seem to be calling for, in which teachers present academic information and promote character traits to students, whose main job is to receive what the teachers attempt to deposit in them.

Dewey as disagreeable scapegoat: the failure of traditional approaches

According to Dewey (1934/1964, p. 6), when students are viewed as empty receptacles or blank slates without active inner lives or pressing interests, outward 'conformity then becomes the criterion' by which both the pupil and the success of the so-called education in character are judged. One reason why Dewey (1934/1964) disparages the goal of outward conformity is that 'initiative, originality and independence are precious qualities in life' (p. 6), especially in a democratic society where students must be 'educated for leadership as well as for obedience' (Dewey, 1897/1964a, p. 113). Another is that, in his view, dogged insistence upon outward conformity is perhaps the chief reason why so much putative education in character fails so miserably. From Dewey's perspective, when teachers tell (and tell) students what to think and how to behave, and then threaten to punish students who fail to fall in line, what develops cannot be called *character* according to any sensible definition, for the result even among the compliant is merely passive, external conformity and divided attention.

Dewey thus consistently resists and rebuts the charge that his indirect approach to education in subject matter and in character is responsible for a decline in moral belief and upright behavior among the young. The real culprit, he (Dewey, 1938/1963) insists, is what he calls 'the typical traditional schoolroom, with its fixed rows of desks and its military regimen' (p. 61); in such circumstances, with so many restrictions placed upon physical, intellectual and moral freedom, students may appear to be engaged in instruction, behaving as they ought, but 'everyone who is acquainted with … this system … well knows that thoughts, imaginations, desires, and sly activities run their own unchecked course behind this façade' (p. 62). The reason why Dewey is determined to pay so much attention to students' natural tendencies, interests and impulses is that they are always present and in operation, even if they appear not to be. He (Dewey, 1916/1944) is not arguing that all desires are to be encouraged, for 'it does not follow that these tendencies are … desirable because they are natural; but … since they are there, they are operative and must be taken account of' (pp. 116–117). The teacher must 'see to it that the desirable ones have an environment which keeps them active' (p. 117)—and an environment designed to constrain movement and to enforce external conformity is sure to have the opposite effect, for 'behind this enforced uniformity individual tendencies operate in irregular and more or less forbidden ways' (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 62).

Dewey (1938/1963) thus agrees with his critics that 'the ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control' (p. 64); but he (Dewey, 1916/1944) also argues that the imposition of behaviors and attitudes cannot achieve the goal, for in such circumstances students are controlled by others, under threat of punishment, while their inner lives run contrary to the imposed discipline. Some may believe that forcing students to persist in distasteful work, to go through the motions of obedience in half-hearted pursuit of an externally imposed goal, strengthens character; but Dewey (1916/1944) scoffs at the notion that self-control is the sweet result of bitter labor and grudging compliance. If it were, he (Dewey, 1916/1944, pp. 133–134) writes, then we ought to do our best to ensure that

> the subject matter presented is uncongenial, for then there is no motive (so it is supposed) except the acknowledgment of duty or the value of discipline. The logical result is expressed with literal truth in the words of an American humorist: "It makes no difference what you teach a boy so long as he doesn't like it."

Part of Dewey's (1916/1944) point is that, outside of school, such a position is generally thought laughable. In 'the average schoolroom' (p. 155), however, there is so much insistence on conformity and uniformity and so much dependence on the supposedly salutary effects of seeming obedience that 'it is hardly possible to overstate the contrast between such conditions and the situations of active contact with things and persons in the home, on the playground, in fulfilling of ordinary responsibilities of life' (p. 155). Would anyone ever seriously conclude, for example, that a doctor or a lawyer 'would stick to his work more conscientiously if it was so uncongenial to him that he did it merely from a sense of obligation' (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 130)?

Of course not. But the approaches to education advocated by Dewey's critics emphasize such external obligation and encourage teachers to ignore, perhaps even to disparage, the nature of students' interests and the quality of their present experiences, leading to a state of affairs in which, even when students appear outwardly to be acquiescing to instruction, they are inwardly engaged in strategies of avoidance. As Dewey (1916/1944) argues, pursuing goals without regard to students' interests and experiences in pursuit of those goals 'diminishes … the significance of the activity and tends to reduce it to a drudgery from which one would escape if he could' (p. 106); and many students do escape, says Dewey (1916/1944), some by rebelling openly, others more slyly and surreptitiously, behind the façade of feigned engagement. From Dewey's (1903) perspective, students who have learned the skill of displaying outward conformity, perhaps only in order to avoid the unpleasant ramifications of overt resistance, are developing 'divided attention' (p. 10), not 'the flexible and firm fiber of character' (p. 32) or academic understanding. 'The great mass of existing school work' (p. 10), he argues, contributes to this catastrophic division of attention.

For Dewey, then, the real cause of the decline of character is an approach that seeks to pound or pour particular attitudes and traits into the minds of students who, if they are engaged at all, are merely superficially engaged; the culprit is a

system that enforces conformity and uniformity and denies the existence and the potential of students' motivating interests and impulses. Those impulses, argues Dewey (1903), cannot be suppressed but they may be camouflaged, as each student 'learns in a most miraculous way the exact amount of attention that has to be given to this external material to satisfy the requirements of the teacher, while saving up the rest of his mental powers for following out lines of imagery that appeal to him' (p. 10). We should not congratulate ourselves for securing such superficial attention, writes Dewey (1903), for however well behaved the student may appear to be externally, 'the deeper intellectual and moral nature of the child has secured absolutely no discipline at all, but has been left to follow its own caprices, the disordered suggestions of the moment, or of past experience' (p. 10). Thus, contrary to the assertions of his critics, Dewey is the enemy of caprice whether it is drawn outward by the removal of all restraint or driven inward by the imposing strictures of 'oppressive benevolence' (Westbrook, 1991, p. 107).

Did Dewey abandon character?

Dewey's statements in favor of education in character, including widely accepted, traditional notions of what *character* may entail (e.g. persistence in the face of difficulty and temptation), are quite straightforward, as are his condemnations of would-be progressive approaches that supposedly 'set Johnny free to blossom' (Braley, 1986, p. 96). In response, critics like Hunter (2000) argue that, although in his younger years Dewey might have sought to cultivate traditional notions of character, Dewey later 'devalued' (p. 61) or 'retreated from the concept' (p. 69). Similarly, Sichel (1988) asserts that, over the course of his career, Dewey 'modified or rather downgraded the concept of "character" within his ethical theory' (pp. 59–60), basing her judgment in large part on her analysis of the earlier (Dewey & Tufts, 1908) and later (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) editions of Dewey and Tuft's *Ethics*. Sichel (1988) argues that, in the second edition, 'character does not retain the same role and importance' (p. 60) as in the first and that, therefore, Dewey 'downgraded' (p. 59) the concept.

However, an examination of Dewey's views after 1932, that is, after the publication of the second edition of his and Tufts' *Ethics*, reveals that he continued to emphasize the role of character and moral education long after he had supposedly devalued it. For example, in *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938/1963), he argues that traditional approaches to education so stifle the movement and thought of students that teachers can hardly get to know them—and that if teachers do not have the chance to get to know who their students really are as people and as thinkers, 'there is only an accidental chance that the material of study and the methods used in instruction will so come home to an individual that his development of mind and character is actually directed' (p. 62). Similarly, in *Freedom and Culture* (Dewey, 1939/1989), Dewey unapologetically connects his views of the moral nature of democracy to the ideas of Thomas Jefferson: 'the chief reason,' he

writes, 'is that Jefferson's formulation [of the principles of democracy] is moral through and through' (p. 119).

Nevertheless, referring specifically to *Freedom and Culture*, Edmundson (2006) accuses Dewey of rejecting the abstract moral principles Jefferson introduced into the Declaration of Independence. According to Edmundson (2006), Dewey 'suggests that the philosophical principles that underlie that document have "gone out of vogue"' (p. 72). However, as the following quote makes clear, it is Jefferson's language, not his principles, that Dewey (1939/1989, p. 119) says are out of fashion:

> The words in which [Jefferson] stated the moral basis of free institutions have gone out of vogue. We repeat the opening words of the Declaration of Independence, but unless we translate them they are couched in a language that, even when it comes readily to our tongue, does not penetrate today to the brain.

Dewey's concern here is not that Jefferson was overly moral, but that Jefferson's archaic wording may prevent modern generations from understanding and enacting the moral principles embedded in the Declaration. He (Dewey, 1939/1989, pp. 100–101) writes,

> with the founders of American democracy, the claims of democracy were inherently one with the demands of a just and equal morality. We cannot now well use their vocabulary. Changes in knowledge have outlawed the significations of the words they commonly used. But in spite of the unsuitability of much of their language for present use. . . .the task of those who retain belief in democracy is to revive and maintain in full vigor the original conviction of the intrinsic moral nature of democracy. . . .which provides a moral standard for personal conduct.

Here we see that Dewey rejects Jefferson's language but embraces Jefferson's view of democracy as intrinsically moral; indeed, it is because he shares Jefferson's determination to maintain democracy's moral vigor that Dewey rejects Jefferson's wording as unsuitable. Although Edmundson (2006) accuses Dewey of saying that the moral and philosophical principles that underlie the Declaration 'have been weakened by historic and by philosophic criticism' (p. 72), what Dewey (1939/1989, pp. 119–120) actually says is that,

> today … we are not given to associating politics with the plans of the Creator; the doctrine of natural rights which governed [Jefferson's] style of expression has been weakened by historic and by philosophic criticism. To put ourselves in touch with Jefferson's position we have therefore to translate the word "natural" into *moral*'.

Thus, in 1939, seven years after the publication of the second edition of his and Tufts's *Ethics*, Dewey places individual and societal morality at the center of his thinking about democracy. Furthermore, as late as 1946, Dewey writes that discussions of the meaning, nature and content of *character* 'are integral portions of any adequate ethical theory' Dewey, 1946, p. 236) and that 'character is a fact entering into any moral judgment passed' (p. 237). So when Sichel (1988) posits that, by 1932, Dewey 'perhaps … assumed that the concept of "character" was an unnecessary residue from older theories' (p. 60), she must be wrong, as must be

Hunter (2000), who suggests that the young Dewey emphasized character 'perhaps in deference to the popularity of the concept' (p. 61). Even as his long career drew to a close, Dewey did not assume character to be unnecessary and, so far as I can tell, seems to have never, even in his younger years, deferred to the popularity of any concept.

I do not mean to say that Dewey never changed his mind about anything—his repudiation of the doctrine of recapitulation is an obvious example. Nor am I arguing that his views about what character consists of did not evolve. All in all, however, his view of character throughout his career was remarkably consistent. For example, early in his career he (Dewey, 1897/1964a) wrote that we cannot define 'moral powers' (p. 114) and 'ethical values' (p., 114) apart from specific situations, because 'we need to know the social situations with reference to which the individual will have to use' (p. 115) those faculties. He says virtually the same thing nearly 50 years later when he (Dewey, 1946) writes that, in order to discuss the nature of an ethical standard, we need to focus on all of 'the essential conditions of the ethical judgment and situation' (p. 235) and that the definition of a term such as *character* depends upon 'reference to a situation' (p. 234).

Although Dewey is accused of rejecting the concept, character occupies a prominent position in his thinking and his writing throughout his career: upholding the role of the will; urging teachers to provide mature guidance; sternly opposing the pursuit of fleeting, unfettered whim; insisting on the moral foundation and responsibilities of democracy; and demanding that those who speak of *character* get down to cases so that the definition may not be 'based upon opinion' (Dewey, 1946, p. 234). Why, then, would so many of his opponents, scholarly and otherwise, accuse him of denouncing the development of character and even of abandoning character entirely? One reason, it seems to me, is Dewey's personal rejection of religion and religious tradition.

'A convenient symbol of opprobrium'

As Girard (1986) notes, in a time of crisis, whether real or imagined, those outside of the religious mainstream are especially likely to be identified as culpable and, although Dewey did not abandon the concept of character, he certainly did abandon the religious basis that many of his critics find essential to the concept. For example, Hunter (2000) writes that 'the demise of character begins with the destruction of creeds' (p. xii) and argues that 'the heart of Dewey's innovations was a rejection of revealed religion as the foundation of educational practice' (p. 60). Indeed, Edmundson (2006) argues that 'Dewey's thought is characterized by hostility … to religion' (p. 7)—a sentiment shared by a number of other critics (see for example Braley, 1986; Breese, 1990; Calvert, 2007; Lockerbie, 1994; O'Hear, 1991; Rushdoony, 1963)—and that Dewey is more interested in undermining religion than he is in teaching and learning.

Not all of Dewey's critics find him to be so anti-religious, however. For example, Nelson (1987) writes that, although Dewey personally rejected faith in Christ,

he 'was never hostile … to what [he] called "evangelical Christianity"' (pp. 177–178). Still, so many others have publicly denounced Dewey for being hostile to religion and have connected his supposed hostility to a general, catastrophic decline in character that they have made of Dewey 'a convenient symbol of opprobrium' (Westbrook, 1991, p. 10), and 'a convenient scapegoat for what's wrong with … education' (Beck, 2008). When well-respected, influential scholars such as Bloom (2012), Hirsch (1987), O'Hear (1991), Hunter (2000), Kirk (1985) and Edmundson (2006) blame Dewey for the decline and fall of education and moral behavior in the West, who can blame concerned citizens on the fringes of the academy for piling on? For example, with regard to O'Hear (1991) in particular, Brehony (1997) notes that powerful politicians, journalists and others in Great Britain frequently '[echo] the views of … Anthony O'Hear' (p. 427) because of O'Hear's status as a respected professor of philosophy and because of his participation in organizations 'at the very apex of the English education policy-making structure' (p. 427). Evidently, in part because of anti-Dewey pronouncements made by reputable and otherwise dependable scholars, 'reviling Dewey has become fashionable' (Brehony, 1997, p. 427) on both sides of the Atlantic and is 'attaining the status of commonsense' (p. 427).

Of course, fashion is not what is at stake. Some who revile Dewey, counting on their audience to have appropriated the commonsense, anti-Dewey sentiments propagated by so many scholars, set Dewey up as a straw man to advance their own political and educational agendas. Duigon (n.d.) provides an excellent, if somewhat extreme, example. In an essay intended to convince Christian parents to pull their children out of public school 'and make sure they receive a Christian education,' Duigon claims that Dewey's writing about education and democracy has been 'most influential'; he then asserts that, because of Dewey's influence, students in the public schools are in danger because 'what Dewey usually meant by "democracy" was a mass of docile, conformist commoners benevolently ruled by an all-wise scientific and political elite'. I trust that those who have actually read Dewey, whether friends or foes, will recognize the error of Duigon's assertion, for Dewey (see for example Dewey, 1916/1944) attacked docility, conformity and elitism at every opportunity he got. Whether Duigon has read Dewey or not I cannot say, but he certainly attempts to make use of the commonsense notion that Dewey is out to undermine the learning, the morality and the religiosity of young people. I began my teaching career in a fine, Christian school and can think of some good reasons why parents might choose a private, Christian education for their children; but parents who send their children to public schools need not worry that John Dewey is going to reach up from the grave to destroy their children's character.

Breese (1990), however, wants parents to fear exactly that, for he identifies Dewey as one of seven men who rule the world from the grave. Citing Bloom (2012) and other mainstream scholars to support his views of public education, Breese (1990) argues that Dewey 'refashioned the educational system in America' (p. 155) and 'had an effect as well on the way students in most other nations were educated' (p. 155); indeed, Breese (1990) argues, Dewey continues to exert a vast

and catastrophic influence even now, for 'the world of modern and very confused thought is ruled by its master, John Dewey' (p. 177). One of the most visible and disturbing effects of Dewey's influence, according to Breese (1990), is that 'the old concepts of honor, honesty, virtue, and other truths we once thought to be self-evident are fading fast' (p. 171). Like Duigon, Breese's goal seems to be to convince Christian parents to abandon the public schools; and, like Duigon, Breese finds Dewey to be a convenient scapegoat.

Of course, Dewey makes such a convenient scapegoat in part because, although they might not have read him, so many people have heard of him—and what they have heard, even from scholars, is that his 'influence [has been] pervasive' (Breese, 1990, p. 155). Kliebard (2002) points out, however, that 'there is obviously a huge difference between fame or name recognition on the one hand and genuine influence on the other' (p. 94) and writes that, in spite of the fact that Dewey has become a famous symbol of education, 'beyond the symbolism and the slogans that still are sometimes voiced in his name, one can find almost nothing in American school practice of the educational ideas that Dewey propounded over the course of his long life' (p. 94); Westbrook (1991) concurs, for he writes that Dewey's 'critics have vastly over-estimated his influence' (p. 543) and that his 'actual impact on American schools was quite limited' (p. 542). Brehony (1997) demonstrates that the same may be said of schools in the United Kingdom (UK), where Dewey's influence has been 'greatly exaggerated' (p. 429). One critic (Nelson, 1987) points out an intriguing exception to Dewey's lack of influence when he writes that 'conservative evangelical Christians have harshly criticized John Dewey, not without reason. Yet ironically, evangelical and fundamentalist Sunday schools have for a long time practiced his principles' (p. 116).

Research indicates that if Dewey's principles were actually more widely known and practiced in the schools, whether public or private, attempts at character education might be more successful. For example, Snyder et al. (2010) report that only one character education program, Positive Action, meets the US Department of Education's 'evidentiary requirements for improving both academics and behavior' (p. 28); the program relies on exactly the sort of collaborative approach that Dewey advocated, 'whereby interaction between teacher and student is encouraged through the use of structured discussions and activities, and interaction between students is encouraged through structured or semi-structured small-group activities, including games, role plays, and practice of skills' (pp. 31–32). Positive Action contains additional features that Dewey would support: for example, instead of being told what character is and how they should behave, students in the program 'are asked how they like to be treated. Regardless of age, socioeconomic status, gender, or culture, students and adults suggest the same top values of respect, fairness, kindness, honesty, understanding/empathy, and love' (p. 32). According to Snyder et al. (2010), multiple investigations of the program have 'reported beneficial effects on student achievement (e.g., math, reading, and science) and serious problem behaviors' (p. 28) including suspensions, violence rates, sexual activity and drug abuse, 'even though the program does not include

explicit discussion of these outcomes' (p. 29). Academic growth and character development are exactly the results Dewey would have predicted given the indirect, collaborative and democratic approach embodied in the Positive Action program.

Contrary to the assertions of so many of his critics, however, such 'Dewey-esque' (O'Hear, 1991, p. 27) approaches to education are quite rare. As Kliebard (2002) notes, 'it would be a formidable task to find any of Dewey's important ideas on curriculum actually being practiced in American schools' (p. 94). Still, Dewey serves as an awfully 'convenient scapegoat' (Beck, 2008). The problem for his critics is that, evincing great character, he refuses to take the blame.

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