

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrages

Pring, R. (2007). *John Dewey: A philosopher of education for our time?* New York: Continuum.

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Those who are familiar with the scholarship of Richard Pring will not be disappointed with the accounts he provides of his figurative meetings with John Dewey. Starting with his vague familiarity with Dewey as an undergraduate student at University College London, and moving on to his knowledge of the days when Dewey was vilified by many philosophers, educators, and politicians for his infrequently read and often wrongly interpreted writings; then continuing into the time of his utilization of Dewey's ideas in the field of vocational education, Pring leads us to the query embedded in the subtitle of his work: *A philosopher of education for our time?* Much has changed, of course, since the time of Pring's non-introduction to Dewey and his rather uniform rejection, if not castigation, to the mixture of praise and criticism of him today. But have social and educational changes been sufficiently revolutionary to merit even raising the question of whether Dewey is *a*—not *the*—philosopher of education for our time much less providing a positive answer? For Pring, the answer to his question rests largely in understanding and evaluating Dewey's key emphases as they regard several themes: educational aims and child-centeredness, experience and reflection, school and society, individual and community, inquiry and truth, and knowledge and curriculum.

While providing a cursory intellectual biography of Dewey, Pring makes a seemingly nonchalant remark about what makes Dewey so relevant as an educator six decades after his death. The remark is important for at least two reasons. First, it gives a clear clue as to how Pring may eventually answer the question of whether Dewey is a philosopher for our times. Pointedly, he notes that Dewey is relevant today. Yet, the issue is not whether he is relevant, but whether he is sufficiently relevant to be considered worthy of sustained interest. Second, Pring also hints at why he will conclude that Dewey is a philosopher of education for the twenty-first century. He believes that embedded in Dewey's view of the job of the philosopher of education is the key to his relevancy. That is, the philosopher's job is neither to take sides between warring educational ideologies nor to argue for a middle ground between conflicting dogmas. Instead, the philosopher's job is to work toward a different set of ideas that leads toward a reflective understanding of educational practice. In other words, philosophy that is tied to educational practice is relevant. Philosophy that is written for its own sake or only for the theoretical consumption of other philosophers is not relevant—at least not to most educational practitioners. Of course, the proposed different set of ideas is not just an amalgam of random thoughts, but those that Dewey frames in his educational writings and are to be employed as instruments for both educational theorizing and practice. The dynamic and forward thinking Dewey, therefore, sets—and continues to set—himself apart as a philosopher of education for our time. But what are the ideas that Dewey offers that make him relevant today?

When Pring moves into Dewey's ideas about educational aims, educative experiences, growth, habits, means, and ends, he does a beautiful job of explicating them, tying them together, and showing their relevancy for educators today. Likewise, when he introduces the reader to Dewey's ideas of experience, inquiring, knowing, and making sense of matters, he is exceptionally well-rooted in Dewey's works. Hence, we receive a balanced, accurate, and fair-minded description of Dewey's foundational educational conceptions. However, when Pring says that "science and *religion* are equal partners" [emphasis added] in Dewey's quest for meaning of human experience, he disconnects with many other interpreters of Dewey and, arguably, Dewey himself. This disconnect may be especially manifest if ethics and aesthetics are left outside Pring's ideas of science and religion. No doubt, Dewey greatly valued both religious experience—but not traditional religions—and scientific inquiry as contributors to personal and social meaning. But Dewey did not want to foreground or otherwise stress "religion" in any conventional understanding of the idea. Nor did Dewey wish to draw attention to religious experience and science at the expense of aesthetics, ethics, and other domains in the pursuit of meaning. Pring does, however, rightly suggest to the reader that Dewey was a religious person, although not a proponent of either supernatural or institutional religion.

As Pring turns his attention to child-centeredness, curriculum, and related matters, he carefully and rightly distinguishes Dewey's views from those of romantic progressives and William Kilpatrick. Similarly, his analyses of Dewey's ideas regarding community, individuality, democracy, and ethics show great insight into the mind and spirit of Dewey. When Pring veers toward pragmatism, meaning, truth, and value he returns to Dewey's intellectual biography, albeit in a way that is more philosophical than his earlier excursion. This time he gives attention to the impacting influence of evolutionary theories and idealism on Dewey as he made his move toward pragmatism. Injected into this discussion are pertinent thoughts on how Dewey was both a partial product of his world and a partial producer of a new world, including portions of the world today.

In his final chapter, Pring presents to the reader several contemporary educational challenges, especially as they are manifested in the UK. But his analyses have relevance to other democracies, as well, although the proposed solutions and the outcomes are likely to vary somewhat from nation to nation. But, as expected, Pring makes a compelling argument that Dewey is a philosopher of education for our times. Dewey's probing questions, methods of inquiry, reflective analyses, tentative conclusions, and more highly commend him to us today. In the vein, Pring concludes: "The future for Dewey, as indeed it should be for us all, is one where we take the voice and the experience of the young learner seriously, where we explore how the wisdom we have inherited in different forms and packages might help those young people to face the future with greater capability and hope, and to approach this not dogmatically but in the spirit of experiment, tentative conclusions, openness to criticism and openness to all the different voices in our complex society." In view of Pring's overall analysis, therefore, it is easy to conclude that anyone who is searching for an introductory book to Dewey's educational thought will not go astray if she or he selects this work.