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The Second Confucius

Review of John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

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The Second Confucius

Review of John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

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Philosophers may be conveniently classified under two main heads: there are those who are content to investigate particular groups of problems and leave the links between them to look after themselves, and there are others who, seeing the world as an organic order, seek to build systems and subordinate parts to wholes; to this latter class there must always come a moment when the need arises for an aesthetic, to round the system off and make it truly synoptic. Unless, however, they possess exceptional insight into the nature of creative art, this part of their philosophy tends to become a mere adjunct to the rest, possessing – since it was composed to satisfy the demand for all inclusiveness – at most a sort of formal coherence with the body of their thought, but bearing all the marks of its ad hoc origin, so that it seems clumsy, unsystematic and out of sympathy with its ostensible subject. Professor Dewey, who may claim to be the most influential of living American thinkers, belongs to this latter class; this book comes at the end of a prolific and useful philosophical output to which it contributes but little: it marks the final decline of pragmatism as a militant philosophy.

Whatever may be thought of the merits of the doctrine preached by Peirce and James and Schiller, it did express a very definite, if nakedly crude, point of view; it was genuinely iconoclastic and full of passionate activity. Professor Dewey has changed all that: in his gentle and skilful hands pragmatism has lost its vulgarity and shrillness and has grown to be reasonable and conciliatory. But with its aggressiveness it has lost also such originality as it possessed: now it is elderly, respectable, and, it must be added, dull to the last degree. As for the truth, it is lost in a sea of vagueness. not of language but of thought: to this the present volume is no exception; all points of view are touched upon,

amplified a little, mildly criticised, blurred, diluted, and in this form easily absorbed into the all-embracing syncretism which Dr Dewey patiently develops through over three hundred well-printed, beautifully illustrated pages. His prose is clear and technical without being penetrating or precise, his generalisations are sensible but never illuminating: the even flow of what may be called platitudes of the better kind is rarely broken by the appearance of some real problem. But when this does occur, as, for example, in the discussion of statement and expression as contrasted types of meaning – when, that is, the author moves on ground with which he has long been professionally familiar – his comments become unexpectedly sharp and suggestive. But even here one's hopes are quickly dashed: instead of being resolved or at least developed, the problem is glossed and annotated and restated over and over again, then gradually diffused, and finally buried under a heap of vague reflections more or less dimly connected with it.

What is Dr Dewey's central thesis? It is that art is a living element in the experience of the fully developed sentient organism, and must on no account be divorced from it. 'In art as an experience,' Dr Dewey observes, 'actuality and possibility or ideality, the new and the old, the individual and the universal, surface and depth, sense and meaning are integrated in an experience in which they are all transfigured from the significance which belongs to them when isolated in reflection.' There are no dissentient voices, for the audience is fast asleep; there has been nothing quite like it since Bosanquet in his later phase; it is as though all the vigour and expressiveness of American writing had poured itself into the novel, leaving academic prose exhausted and featureless. Dr Dewey's book does not always move on this [388] level; oases do occur: but they are so few and far between that if it is by their fertility that the whole is held to stand or fall, it falls. This is a very great pity, for Dr Dewey, the greatest pedagogue of his generation, distinguished as a sociologist, as a psychologist and as a logician, honoured in America as a man of generous and enlightened outlook, honoured in China as the Second Confucius, is and always has been on the right side in the battle against

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unreason. But his uncontrolled inflation of philosophical currency, so far from popularising the subject, tends necessarily to weaken the influence of philosophers as champions of the civilised life.

At the last moment doubts assail us: perhaps our whole point of view is too narrow, perhaps there exists a demand for precisely this kind of grand style in America or elsewhere; to those who find it interesting this book can do no possible harm, only good – only good.

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