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Communication and Freedom: *The Correspondence of John Dewey*

Martin Coleman

The Correspondence of John Dewey, Volumes 1-3: 1871-1952, Past Masters Series. Edited by Larry A. Hickman, General Editor; Barbara Levine, Editor; Anne Sharp, Editor; Harriet Furst Simon, Editor. Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 2005. For pricing information see <http://www.nlx.com/titles/titldewc.htm> (1 CD-ROM). 1-57085-260-x (Windows)

Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful," wrote American philosopher, psychologist, educator, social scientist, and political activist John Dewey (LW.5.132).¹ His enthusiasm for communication is apparent in the latest edition of *The Correspondence of John Dewey*. The CD-ROM contains over 21,600 letters as well as photographs, facsimiles, and assorted transcribed documents, including the FBI's 1943 report on Dewey, which notes that the "[s]ubject...apparently does nothing but write."²

Dewey undeniably wrote much, but as John Shook points out in his introduction, this did not preclude activity in a number of political, educational, and labor organizations and regular vacationing in Hubbards, Nova Scotia, and Key West, Florida. Furthermore, the letters themselves suggest that this epistolary output (along with the 37 volumes of *The Collected Works of John Dewey*) was not indicative of a professionally minded obsessive. One correspondent writes to Dewey: "Few indeed are the persons who have *joie de vivre*, the capacity to put forth energy and be alively interested in things, without deriving that energy from blind and passionate attachment to some archaic, non-existential compulsion. Philosophers like you are among those few."³

¹Standard references to John Dewey's works are to the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1991), and published as *The Early Works: 1882-1898* (EW), *The Middle Works: 1899-1924* (MW), and *The Later Works: 1925-1953* (LW). These designations are followed by volume and page number. For example, page 270 of volume 5 of *The Later Works* is cited as "LW.5.270."

²1943.04.29 (16483): Federal Bureau of Investigation to To whom it may concern.

³1949.09.04 (11065): John D. Graves to John Dewey.

The writer is commenting on Dewey's temperamental immunity to superstitions, and this temperament is consistent with Dewey's philosophic outlook. As was discussed in the review of the previous edition of *The Correspondence*, Dewey's embrace of the possibilities for growth and meaning in concrete human experience gives added significance to an electronic edition of his works and letters.⁴ Dewey would not have a blind and passionate attachment to a traditional literary medium and instead would be eager to explore the possibilities of an electronic format.

One of the great achievements of the editors of *The Correspondence* is the collection of the equivalent of 60 printed volumes in an easily searched and stored medium. Like the earlier editions of *The Correspondence*, this edition is available on CD-ROM and in a web server format for institutions. For both formats the publisher, InteLex of Charlottesville, Virginia, provides the proprietary application Folio VIEWS, which is required for reading and searching the database (or infobase, as the publisher calls it) of the Dewey correspondence.

This latest edition of *The Correspondence* is the first to cover Dewey's entire correspondence from his first known letter in 1871, a statement of his religious faith submitted to First Congregational Church, Burlington, Vermont, and most likely written by his mother, to his last letters of 1951 and 1952, as well as condolences sent to his widow. This edition contains the third edition of Volume 1, which covers the years 1871 to 1918; the second edition of Volume 2, which covers the years 1919 to 1939; and the first edition of Volume 3, which covers the years 1940 to 1952. This last thirteen-year span contains 12,000 letters compared to 3,800 in Volume 1 and 5,800 in Volume 2. In an improvement over the previous edition of *The Correspondence*, the user is now able to search all three volumes simultaneously. The Center for Dewey Studies is planning a supplementary volume of *The Correspondence* that will begin with 1953. This volume will include correspondence pertaining to the disposition of the Dewey literary estate, the origins of the project to publish *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, and the establishment of the Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

With the first appearance of Volume 3 of *The Correspondence* comes a new introduction by John R. Shook, Associate Professor of Philosophy and

⁴For a review of the previous edition see Martin A. Coleman, "Another Kind of E-Mail: The Electronic Edition of *The Correspondence of John Dewey*," *Documentary Editing*, Summer 2004, 26:2, 92-120. Consult the previous review for more detailed discussions of the first two volumes of the correspondence and of the browsing software.

Director of The Pragmatism Archive at Oklahoma State University. Like the introductions to Volumes 1 and 2 by Larry Hickman and Michael Eldridge, Shook's introduction surveys the vast collection of letters and provides a chronological guide to the high points of *The Correspondence*. The introductory essay is offered as one tool among others that is intended to help the researcher make his or her way through the material. *The Correspondence* also preserves the illegible text, typographical errors, overstrikes, and insertions as well as page breaks and paragraphing found in the original documents. The conventions employed are faithful to the original without being obtrusive for the reader. Other helpful tools include the "Identifications" section, which collects brief profiles of people and organizations mentioned in *The Correspondence*, and the extensive chronology of Dewey's life. The two latter tools may be consulted as needed, but the readable introductions by Hickman, Eldridge, and Shook are recommended reading for anyone interested in serious research involving the correspondence.

Volume 3 of *The Correspondence* provides insights into Dewey's political activities and opinions at a crucial time in United States history, that is, the struggle with communism and the Second World War. Volume 3 also contains a running commentary on Dewey's continued philosophical reflections. And, of course, it includes letters discussing family matters such as his second marriage, his children and grandchildren, and his health.

Dewey's political activity had brought him to the notice of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1928 in connection with the notorious Sacco-Vanzetti case.⁵ A document from 1930 reveals that the FBI was interested in Dewey's views regarding communism.⁶ A document from 1942 is a summary of reports from the Special Committee on un-American activities, and it concludes that Dewey was not "engaged in any activity which would be considered inimical to the best interest of the internal security of this country."⁷

Shook, in his introduction, refers to a 1957 document not yet included with *The Correspondence* that indicates the FBI still had not lost interest in Dewey even after his death and that J. Edgar Hoover requested a posthumous report on Dewey. This document gives the cause of the 1942 report: it was a Custodial Detention-C investigation. This means that if the report had resulted in the issuance of a custodial detention card, Dewey could have

⁵1928.12.17 (12505): Federal Bureau of Investigation Division Director to W. J. Morris.

⁶1930.01.28 (10929): Federal Bureau of Investigation to To whom it may concern.

⁷1942.10.20? (16481): Federal Bureau of Investigation to To whom it may concern.

been arrested any time national security was thought to require it. Shook writes that the 1957 report “laconically notes that among the many messages of congratulations for [Dewey’s] ninetieth birthday, one letter was from President Harry Truman.”

The 1942 FBI report notes that Dewey was mercilessly criticized by communists for his work in 1937 as Chairman of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials. And even his friend Corliss Lamont writes in 1940, “I still think that your attitude on the Moscow Trials and on Soviet Russia in general is terribly mistaken.”⁸ In 1947 the FBI notes Dewey’s attempt to dissociate himself from a book, *Man Against Myth* by Barrows Dunham, which he had earlier endorsed. According to the FBI report Dewey was prompted by his friend Albert C. Barnes to pursue this course, and indeed Dewey wrote Dunham explaining that he was “disturbed by the reports that my endorsement of your book carried with it an endorsement of that part of your economic-political with which agree with those of the P C A, Wallace and other Pro-Soviet partisans.”⁹ Dewey was cordial as he explained that he did not write with the hope of changing Dunham’s view but rather with the intent of explaining why he was disturbed. Dewey went on to explain that he believed “[a]ppeasement of the Soviet brand of totalitarianism if kept up especially by this country is as sure...to lead to war as did the earlier appeasement of the German brand.”¹⁰

The disagreement with Lamont and the dissociation with the views of Dunham did not mean Dewey always agreed with those who opposed communism. In 1949 Dewey and his friend and former student Sidney Hook disagreed in print over the effort to identify and terminate teachers who belonged to the Communist Party. Dewey is concerned about the wider results of such tactics, while Hook points out that Communist Party members are obligated to teach communist principles. Hook writes, “I conclude that membership in the C. P. is prima facie evidence of a man’s unfitness to teach.”¹¹

Dewey is sometimes criticized as being politically naïve, but he explicitly distinguished himself from the American liberals who deluded themselves about Josef Stalin. Dewey wrote in 1940 that it “is a tragedy that Russia turned out as she has—Stalin is one of the great Judas Iscariots of all history

⁸1940.04.24 (13658): Corliss Lamont to John Dewey.

⁹1947.05.03 (14775): John Dewey to Barrows Dunham.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹1949.06.27 (13183): Sidney Hook to John Dewey.

but since he is what he is, it is well to have it made apparent, tho of course the good party fanatics wont see it.”¹² Three years later he continued his condemnation of Stalin writing that he “did so much to kill the idealistic enthusiasm I saw in ’27, that his destruction of what was best in the revolution is a thing I find it difficult to forgue in him. That the Russians are a great people and will in time find their way back I have never doubted.”¹³

Not only do Dewey’s letters challenge charges of at least certain kinds of *naïveté*, they can be positively prescient. Consider a 1942 letter in which he wrote that “most schemes of world organization seem to mean in practice some kind of ‘Anglo-saxon’ hegemony or some quasi military policing of th[e] world to keep ‘bad nations’ from breaking loose. And/or most such schemes are too much of the nature of blue-prints to meet the actual strain of || events.”¹⁴ If he had spoken of rogue nations and ideological fantasies instead of “bad nations” and “blue-prints” he would have produced a contemporary commentary.

What emerges from Dewey’s correspondence is a picture of a thinker who is fallible but honest and who refuses to be tied down by party lines. That he disagreed with both communists and anti-communists indicates an independence of mind and a deep loyalty to the best aspects of a liberal political tradition. He further demonstrated this independence of mind and commitment to freedom in his opposition to the internment of Japanese-Americans after the outbreak of war with Japan, and also in the case of English philosopher Bertrand Russell. The letter to President Franklin Roosevelt concerning internment of Japanese-American makes the claim that such methods approximate “the totalitarian theory of justice practiced by the Nazis in their treatment of the Jews.” It also states that the public opinion motivating the internment seems “to have been born in large part of ancient racial prejudices, greed for the land the Japanese have developed, and a popular hysteria inflamed by stories of Japanese sabotage and disloyalty.”¹⁵

In the case of Russell, conservative religious groups successfully sought to prevent him from taking a chair of philosophy at City College in New York, because they objected to his writings on sex and marriage. Russell was deemed by his critics to be a threat to the moral well-being of the youth. As

¹²1940.02.19 (08683): John Dewey to Bertha Aleck.

¹³1943.06.25 (08692): John Dewey to Bertha Aleck.

¹⁴1942.06.04 (13817): John Dewey to Mercedes Moritz Randall.

¹⁵1942.04.30 (14138): John Dewey et al. to Franklin D. Roosevelt.

the scholar Robert B. Westbrook rightly points out, “Dewey had little love for Russell or his work”; however, Dewey not only fought the protest against Russell, he also found Russell a position when efforts against the protest failed.¹⁶

The Correspondence illustrates Dewey’s attempts on Russell’s behalf. In a letter to Sidney Hook, Dewey wrote that he had said he “would be glad to be included in the || Phil Assn statement & added a line about ‘clerical interference’.”¹⁷ Dewey signed a letter to Mayor La Guardia of New York from the Committee for Cultural Freedom, of which Dewey was the honorary chairman. The letter states that the court decision barring Russell from his appointment “is the most serious setback yet sustained by the cause of free education in America.”¹⁸ Dewey also wrote personally to La Guardia after the mayor attempted to quell the controversy by striking from the budget the position at City College originally offered to Russell. Dewey argues that such a decision is as fraught with disaster for higher institutions of learning as the original attack on Russell.¹⁹

Given Dewey’s effort on Russell’s behalf and Russell’s own cavalier misreading of Dewey’s work in Russell’s published criticisms, there seems some bit of irony in the wake of a 1950 letter from the American historian and public intellectual Henry Steele Commager to the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy. Commager wrote for the American Center PEN Club in nominating John Dewey for the Nobel Prize in Literature.²⁰ This was the year that Bertrand Russell won the award.

The most philosophically significant correspondence of Volume 3 is that between Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley. A selected and edited version of their correspondence was published in a 700-page volume in 1964 by Sidney Ratner and Jules Altman.²¹ From this philosophical partnership of Dewey and Bentley came the 1951 book *The Knowing and the Known*. Shook notes that “their collaborative attempts to clarify key philosophical terms...had begun in earnest” in 1939, and that in the next 12 years, the period covered

¹⁶Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991) 512.

¹⁷1940.03.17 (13030): John Dewey to Sidney Hook.

¹⁸1940.04.02 (13292): John Dewey, George S. Counts, Sidney Hook, and Horace M. Kallen to Fiorello H. La Guardia.

¹⁹1940.04.06 (13291): John Dewey to Fiorello H. La Guardia.

²⁰1950.01.31 (18953): Henry Steele Commager to Nobel Committee of Swedish Academy.

²¹Sidney Ratner and Jules Altman, editors, *John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley: A Philosophical Correspondence, 1932–1951* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964).

by Volume 3, the two thinkers exchanged over 1400 letters.

The correspondence with Bentley is undeniably significant given the number of letters and subsequent published works (essays, a book, and the published selection of the letters). It seems worthwhile, then, to note the other correspondents Dewey held in similar esteem. In 1949 a New York lawyer named John Graves initiated an exchange of letters with Dewey on psychological and philosophical subjects. Dewey appreciated greatly the candor that characterized his correspondence with Graves, and he wrote, "You can hardly realize what it signifies to me to send you practically anything which comes into my head." Dewey continued: "I only have two other correspondents, one A F Bentley...and the other still a graduate student in phil at Columbia."²² Dewey was referring to Lyle K. Eddy to whom he then wrote about Graves: "He [Graves] has in addition to great energy [a]nd enthusiasm a saving grace of humor...and I get personal encouragement as well as ideas on special points from him."²³

The correspondence with Graves provides an interesting insight into Dewey's understanding of his own philosophical talent. Dewey wrote:

[W]hen I was younger and not so set in conceit as I've since become I used to compare myself philosophically with colleagues and others. I concluded that in the long run I had one advantage. As a rule, when they ran across something with which they didn't agree, the one interest they displayed—if any at all—was to find reasons for rejecting it. I found by contrast was to wonder why an intelligent person would hold and say such a thing, and it didn't I decided my policy was the better of the two.²⁴

Obviously, Bentley, Eddy, and Graves were not the only people with whom Dewey was corresponding. It seems apparent he was referring to philosophical correspondents. His range of other correspondents was wide and varied. Among his more regular exchanges were those with his former students and friends Joseph Ratner and Sidney Hook; with other professional colleagues such as Max C. Otto, Adelbert Ames, Jr., and Horace M. Kallen; and with many other friends such as Corinne Chisholm Frost, a teacher and journalist with whom he corresponded for 20 years, and Bertha Aleck, a friend met while traveling and with whom he exchanged letters for 12 years.

²²1949.07.26 (11009): John Dewey to John D. Graves.

²³1949.07.30 (14296): John Dewey to Lyle K. Eddy.

²⁴1949.07.26 (11009): John Dewey to John D. Graves.

Throughout Volume 3 there are many letters from Dewey to Roberta Lowitz Grant, who would become his second wife. (There are 281 letters from Dewey to Roberta in *The Correspondence*.) She was the daughter of a family from Oil City, Pennsylvania, with whom Dewey was friends prior to her birth. The letters between Dewey and Roberta begin in 1936. She married Robert C. Grant in September 1939, and he died in December the following year. Shook points out in his introduction that no letters from Roberta to Dewey have been found. Dewey wrote, "I never leave your letters around & I never keep them long, much as I should like to. But I don't keep them as I see sometimes you have kept mine."²⁵ Dewey writes of family, friends, other domestic matters, and his activities of the day. Dewey and Roberta were married in December 1946, and Volume 3 includes letters arranging the small ceremony and informing close friends of the wedding.²⁶

The Correspondence of John Dewey has always taken advantage of the great space afforded by the electronic medium to include not only letters written by or to John Dewey but also letters written by or to his family and friends. These additional letters include correspondence of his wives prior to their involvement with Dewey. Also included are letters about Dewey, and there are several such letters that appear in *The Correspondence* for the first time with the third edition. Some of the additions are newly discovered letters to and from John Dewey, but the majority are not. One addition is from Emma Goldman to Agnes Inglis commenting on Dewey's writing: "This morning I read an article of his in the Seven Arts. It was positively empty. Not a single thought or idea worth while."²⁷ Other additions critical of Dewey come from George Santayana. These inclusions give background to the disagreements between the two thinkers discussed in the previous review of *The Correspondence*.²⁸

Santayana characterized Dewey's naturalism as "half-hearted" because it seemed to emphasize the human foreground to the exclusion of the background of the nonhuman universe. Dewey responded that Santayana's naturalism was "broken-backed" because it seemed to exclude human experiences of reflection from nature. Santayana's response to the whole

²⁵1940.02.27? (09724): John Dewey to Roberta Lowitz Grant.

²⁶1946.12.08 (13426): John Dewey to Jerome Nathanson; 1946.12.09 (10341): John Dewey to W. R. Houston; 1946.12.09 (14064): John Dewey to Max C. Otto.

²⁷1917.04.30 (10991): Emma Goldman to Agnes Inglis.

²⁸See Coleman, "Another Kind of E-Mail," *Documentary Editing*, Summer 2004, 26:2, 92-120.

exchange revealed his shyness at direct confrontation, and in fact he seemed surprised at the controversy as if he were very unpracticed in philosophical debate. In contrast, Dewey's response indicated that the exchange was a matter of course and nothing to be lingered over. The same kind of detachment is evident in Dewey's critical remarks on Santayana appearing for the first time in Volume 3.

Dewey acknowledged with approval Santayana's recognition of the biological and the virtues of Santayana's books (and *The Life of Reason* in particular). But without lapsing into anything like a polemical tone Dewey, borrowing a phrase of William James, characterized Santayana to Lyle Eddy as a "once-born" intellectual.²⁹ Dewey makes the comment by way of contrast with his own continually developing views and in agreement with Santayana's own statements concerning his own fully formed philosophical outlook. Elsewhere Dewey echoes in agreement another's criticism of Santayana's philosophy as fixed and juvenile.³⁰ Dewey also makes a telling comment about Santayana's "unfortunate acquaintance with East Indian philosophy."³¹

The difference between Santayana's fixity and Dewey's emphasis on growth and developmental processes suggests the appeal that Dewey's philosophy holds for those who would read approvingly Joseph Ratner's encomium to Dewey on his 85th birthday, and included in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*:

Dewey's greatest overall contribution has been the encouragement he has given to people...to work out their problems from their own centers, and to learn that only through frank interchange of ideas and through cooperative investigation and team-play can progress be made in the solution of theoretical and practical problems.³²

A great virtue of *The Correspondence of John Dewey* is the opportunity it gives to scholars to work out their problems with a freedom not always possible when one is working with materials restricted to an archive or a library's special collections. The editors of *The Correspondence* honor the spirit of Dewey by embracing new technologies to promote conversation about and inquiry into Dewey's ideas.

²⁹1948.05.04 (14921): John Dewey to Lyle K. Eddy.

³⁰1944.05.21 (10022): John Dewey to W. R. Houston.

³¹Ibid.

³²1945.10.18 (20298): Sidney Ratner to *New York Times* Editor.

