

## WHO KILLED EXCELLENCE?

by

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The history of American education can roughly be divided into three distinct periods each of which represents a particular, dominant world view. The first period -- which lasted from Colonial times to about the 1840s -- saw the dominance of the Calvinist worldview in which God's omnipotent sovereignty was the central reality of man's existence. In the Calvinist scheme of things the purpose of man's life was to glorify God, and the attainment of Biblical literacy was considered the overriding spiritual and moral function of education. Latin, Greek and Hebrew were studied because they were the original languages of the Bible and of theological literature. Thus, this period in American education is characterized by a very high standard of literacy. The documents of the founding fathers were the products of this period, and writers like Edgar

Allan Poe, who wrote for the general public, enhanced the enjoyment of their readers by using extensive, rich vocabularies and weaving long, complex sentences. Their readers relished such literary artistry.

The second period, lasting from the 1840s until about World War One, can be called the Hegelian period. It was the period in which Hegel's statist-idealist philosophy spread throughout the Western world like a malignant spiritual disease destroying Calvinism in its wake. Hegel dethroned the Jehovah of the Old Testament and the Christ of the New Testament. In their place he offered a pantheistic view of the universe in which everything that existed was a somewhat formless God in the process of perfecting himself through a dynamic, endless struggle called the dialectic. In this scheme man became the highest manifestation of God in the universe. As one Hegelian educator put it, man "is Divinity awaking out of the sleep of infinitely self-expanded being."

In this pantheist scheme of things the purpose of life was to glorify man and the instrument through which his collective power could be exercised -- the state. It is during this Hegelian period that the public school movement developed, promoting a secular form of education which gradually eliminated the Bible from the classrooms of America.

Yet even the Hegelian period was one of high literacy, for Hegel had stressed intellectual development since he considered man's mind to be the highest manifestation of God in the universe. Latin and Greek were studied because they were the languages of the pagan classics. Discipline, punctuality, high academic standards and

achievement were the hallmarks of the public schools during this period.

The third period, which began around World War One and has lasted to the present, can be designated the Progressive period. It came into being mainly as a result of the new behavioral psychology developed in the experimental laboratories of Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig in Germany. The major American figures who studied under Wundt and came back to the United States to revolutionize American education were James McKeen Cattell, G. Stanley Hall, Charles H. Judd and James Earl Russell.

Science and evolution replaced religion as the focus of their faith, and dialectical materialism superceded Hegel's dialectical idealism<sup>as the process by which man's moral progress was made. The word progressive in fact comes from this dialectical concept of progress.</sup> In this scheme, the purpose of man's life was to deny and reject the supernatural and to sacrifice <sup>oneself</sup> ~~himself~~ to the collective <sup>often referred to</sup> known as "humanity."

The pioneer in the progressive movement who beat the first path to Wundt's laboratory in Leipzig was G. Stanley Hall. Hall had already spent the years 1868-70 studying in Germany and had returned to the United States seething with hatred for his Puritan New England heritage. He wrote in his autobiography:

I fairly loathed and hated so much that I saw about me that I now realize more clearly than ever how possible it would have been for me to have drifted into some, perhaps almost any, camp of radicals and to have come into such open rupture with the scheme of things as they were that I should have been stigmatized as dangerous, at least for any academic career, where the motto

was Safety First. And as this was the only way left open, the alternative being the dread one of going back to the farm, it was most fortunate that these deeply stirred instincts of revolt were never openly expressed and my rank heresies and socialistic leanings unknown.

Hall returned from his Wundtian experience in 1878 and in 1882 created America's first psych lab at Johns Hopkins University. Two of Hall's students were James McKeen Cattell and John Dewey. Cattell journeyed to Leipzig in 1884 where he spent two years studying under the Herr Professor. He returned to the U.S. and created the world's first psychology department at the University of Pennsylvania in 1887.

One biographical account of Cattell's life states:

Cattell's student years in Baltimore, Germany and England -- the period of his greatest originality and productivity in psychology -- were laced with inner complaint. Cattell confided only in his private journal his recurrent feelings of depression, his frequent need of hallucinogenic drugs, and his underlying philosophic stance as a "sceptic and mystic."

Is it not interesting that hallucinogenic drugs were already being used by students of psychology as far back as the 1880s? In 1891 Cattell established Columbia University's department of psychology. During his years at Columbia, Cattell trained more future members of the American Psychological Association than were trained at any other institution. Indeed, Cattell was one of the founders of the American

Psychological Association and the Psychological Review. Under his direction, psychology at Columbia became one of the strongest departments of research and advanced teaching.

No doubt Cattell's most celebrated pupil was Edward L. Thorndike, who had gotten his master's degree under William James at Harvard where he had conducted experiments in animal learning. Under Cattell Thorndike continued his experiments which were to have a devastating impact on American education. Lawrence Cremin writes:

Thorndike called the process by which the animals tended to repeat ever more efficiently and economically behaviors which were rewarded learning, and out of his experiment came a new theory of learning and a new "law" founded on that theory. The theory maintained that learning involves the wedding of a specific response to a specific stimulus through a physiological bond in the neural system, so that the stimulus regularly calls forth the response. In Thorndike's words, the bond between S and R is "stamped in" by being continually rewarded. . . . Whereas previous theories had emphasized practice, or repetition, Thorndike gave equal weight to outcomes -- to success or failure, reward or punishment, satisfaction or annoyance to the learner.

. . . Equally important, perhaps, Thorndike's new law implied a new theory of mind. Building on the idea of the reflex arc, which connected the brain and neural tissue with the total behavior of the organism, he ended the search for mind by eliminating it as a separate entity.

In short, Thorndike reduced psychology to the study of observable,



measurable human behavior -- with the complexity and mystery of mind and soul left out. In summing up his theory of learning, Thorndike wrote: "The best way with children may often be, in the pompous words of an animal trainer, 'to arrange everything in connection with the trick so that the animal will be compelled by the laws of its own nature to perform it.'"

In 1904, Cattell invited his old friend John Dewey to join the faculty at Columbia. From Johns Hopkins, Dewey had not gone to Leipzig like Cattell and others. Instead he taught philosophy at the University of Michigan for about nine years. He had left Johns Hopkins a Hegelian idealist but became a materialist at Michigan. In 1894 he became professor of philosophy and education at the University of Chicago where he created his famous Laboratory School.

The purpose of the school was to see what kind of curriculum was needed to produce socialists instead of capitalists, collectivists instead of individualists. Dewey, along with the other adherents of the new psychology, was convinced that socialism was the wave of the future and that individualism was passé. But the individualist system would not fade away on its own as long as it was sustained by the education American children were getting in their schools.

~~Dewey analyzed American education very thoroughly and came to some very definite conclusions as to how it had to be reformed.~~ Max Eastman wrote<sup>5</sup>:

Dewey was interested in reforming education and wrote a book about it long before he became an instrumental philosopher. The book was called Applied Psychology, and that indicates what his doctrine about education is: Education is life itself, so ~~long as the living thing~~

long as the living thing continues to grow; education is growth under favorable conditions; the school is a place where those conditions should be regulated scientifically.

In other words, if we apply psychology to education, which we have done now for over fifty years, then the ideal classroom is a psych lab and the pupils within it are laboratory animals.

Dewey's joining Cattell and Thorndike at Columbia brought together the lethal trio who were literally to wipe out traditional education and kill academic excellence in America. It would not be accomplished overnight, for an army of new teachers and superintendents had to be trained and an army of old teachers and superintendents had to retire or die off. [By the 1950s, the job had been done so well that Rudolf Flesch could write a book in 1955 entitled Why Johnny Can't Read. Why indeed. Flesch minced no words. He wrote:

The teaching of reading -- all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks -- is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. ]

By 1808 the lethal trio had produced three books of paramount importance to the progressive movement. Thorndike published Animal Intelligence in 1898; Dewey published School and Society in 1899; and in 1908 Cattell produced, through a surrogate by the name of Edmund Burke Huey, The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading.

Concerning Thorndike and Dewey, Lawrence Cremin, in his history of Teachers College, writes:

Like all the pioneers, Thorndike inspired innumerable disciples and leaders to carry on his revolutionary work in education . . . [Leta S. Hollingworth, Arthur I. Gates, Arthur T. Jersild, Irving Lorge, Ruth Strang and Goodwin Watson.]. . .

Indeed, it may well be stated that two thinkers, Thorndike and Dewey, supplied the two great formative influences of twentieth-century educational theory and together established the frame of reference in which their contemporaries and successors were to work.

Actually, Dewey provided the social philosophy of the movement, Thorndike the teaching theories and techniques, and Cattell the organizing energy. There was among all of them, disciples and colleagues, a missionary zeal to rebuild American education on a foundation of science, evolution, humanism, and behaviorism. But it was Dewey who identified high literacy as the culprit in traditional education, the sustaining force behind individualism. He wrote in 1898:

There is . . . a false educational god whose idolators are legion, and whose cult influences the entire educational system.



This is language-study -- the study not of foreign language, but of English; not in higher, but in primary education. It is almost an unquestioned assumption of educational theory and practice both, that the first three years of a child's school-life shall be mainly taken up with learning to read and write his own language. . . .

My proposition is, that conditions -- social, industrial, and intellectual -- have undergone such a radical change, that the time has come for a thoroughgoing examination of the emphasis put upon linguistic work in elementary instruction. . . .

The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school-life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to me a perversion.

And in <sup>(1890)</sup> School and Society he wrote:

The tragic weakness of the present school is that it endeavors to prepare future members of the social order in a medium in which the conditions of the social spirit are eminently wanting. . . .

The mere absorbing of facts and truths is so exclusively individual an affair that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness. There is no obvious social motive for the acquirement of mere learning, there is no clear social gain in success thereat. Indeed, almost the only measure for success is a competitive one, in the bad sense of that term -- a comparison of results in the recitation or in the examination to see which

child has succeeded in getting ahead of others in storing up, in accumulating, the maximum of information.

But in order to reform the system, the mind had to be seen in a different way. Dewey wrote:

Earlier psychology regarded mind as a purely individual affair in direct and naked contact with an external world. . . . At present the tendency is to conceive individual mind as a function of social life -- as not capable of operating or developing by itself, but as requiring continual stimulus from social agencies, and finding its nutrition in social supplies. The idea of heredity has made familiar the notion that the equipment of the individual, mental as well as physical, is an inheritance from the race: a capital inherited by the individual from the past and held in trust by him for the future. The idea of evolution has made familiar the notion that mind cannot be regarded as an individual, monopolistic possession, but represents the outworkings of the endeavor and thought of humanity.

So according to Dewey the one part of our identity that is the most private, the mind, is really not the property of the individual but of humanity, which is merely a euphemism for the collective or the state. That concept is at the very heart of the Orwellian nightmare, and yet that concept is the very basis of our progressive-humanist-behaviorist education system.

Dewey realized that such radical reform was not exactly what the American people wanted. So he wrote:

Change must come gradually. To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction.

The most important of the reforms to be instituted was changing the way children were to be taught to read. Since it had been ordained by Dewey and his colleagues that literacy skills were to be drastically de-emphasized in favor of the development of social skills, a new teaching method that reduced literacy skills was needed. The traditional school used the phonics or phonetic method. That is, children were first taught the alphabet, then the sounds the letters stand for, and in a short time they became independent readers. The new method -- look-say or the word method -- taught children to read English as if it were Chinese or Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The method was not exactly new. It had been invented in the 1830s by Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, the famous teacher of the deaf and dumb. Since deaf-mutes have no conception of a spoken language, they could not learn a phonetic -- or sound-symbol -- system of reading. Instead, they were taught to read by a purely sight method consisting of pictures juxtaposed with whole words. Thus, the whole word was seen to represent an idea or image, not the sounds of language. The written word itself was regarded as a little picture, much like a Chinese ideograph. Gallaudet thought that the method could be adapted for use by normal children and he wrote a little primer based on that concept.

In 1837 the Boston Primary School Committee decided to adopt the primer. By 1844 the results were so <sup>disastrous</sup> ~~devastating~~ that a group of Boston schoolmasters published a blistering attack on the whole-word method and it was thrown out of the schools. The return to common sense in the Boston schools, however, did not mean the end of look-say. It was

kept alive in the new state normal schools where it was taught as a legitimate alternative to the alphabetic-phonics method.

When the progressives decided to revive look-say, they realized that an authoritative book would be necessary to give the method the seal of approval of the new psychology. The progressive <sup>position</sup> was based on Cattell's reaction-time experiments in Wundt's laboratory. Cattell <sup>had</sup> observed that adults could read whole words just as fast as they could read individual letters. From that he concluded that a child could be taught to read simply by showing him whole words and telling him what they said.

For some reason Cattell did not want to write a book himself. So he got one of G. Stanley Hall's students, Edmund Burke Huey, to write a book arguing that look-say was the superior way to teach reading. The book, The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading, was published in 1908. What is astounding is that by 1908 Cattell and his colleagues were very well aware that the look-say method produced inaccurate readers. In fact, Huey argued in favor of inaccuracy as a virtue! He wrote:

Even if the child substitutes words of his own for some that are on the page, provided that those express the meaning, it is an encouraging sign that the reading has been real, and recognition of details will come as it is needed. The shock that such a statement will give to many a practical teacher of reading is but an accurate measure of the hold that a false ideal has taken of us, viz., that to read is to say just what is upon the page, instead of to think, each in his own way, the meaning that the page suggests.

In other words, what an author has to say is less important than what the reader thinks he has to say. And each reader is free to interpret "each in his own way" the message of a written page. Therefore precision of thought and language belongs to a "false ideal" from which teachers have got to shake themselves loose.

No wonder Cattell did not want to write the book himself. He did not want to have to defend it, probably. But the book was immediately adopted by the progressives as the authoritative work on the subject despite the fact that it was written by an obscure student who <sup>had</sup> no experience whatever in the teaching of reading, who wrote nothing further on the subject, and about whom virtually nothing is known.

It is obvious that Dewey, Cattell, Thorndike and their associates knew that the purpose of look-say was indeed to lower the level of literacy of Americans, for G. Stanley Hall, in reviewing Huey's book, even went so far as to extol the virtues of illiteracy. He wrote:

Very many men have lived and died and been great, even leaders of <sup>their</sup> age, without any acquaintance with letters. The knowledge which illiterates acquire is probably on the whole more personal, direct, environmental and probably a much larger proportion of it practical. Moreover, they escape much eyestrain and mental excitement, and, other things being equal, are probably more active and less sedentary. . . . Illiterates escape certain temptations, such as vacuous and vicious reading. Perhaps we are prone to put too high a value both upon the ability required to this art and the discipline involved in doing so, as well as the



culture value that comes to the citizen with his average of only six grades of schooling by the acquisition of this art.

When a nation's leading educational reformers start arguing in favor of illiteracy and inaccurate reading and damning early <sup>emphasis on</sup> ~~English~~ <sup>learning to read</sup> ~~language study~~ as a perversion, then we can expect some strange results to come from our education process. In fact, by the 1950s, the progressives had done such a good job, that Rudolf Flesch could write a book in 1955 entitled Why Johnny Can't Read. Why indeed. Flesch minced no words. He wrote:

The teaching of reading -- all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks -- is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

Flesch then went on to explain how beginning reading instruction in American schools had been radically changed <sup>during the 1930s</sup> from phonics to look-say. What astonished so many parents was the fact that all of this was done with so little public awareness. [Flesch explained how it was done:

It's a foolproof system all right. Every grade-school teacher in the country has to go to a teacher's college or school of education; every teachers' college gives at least one course on how to teach reading; every course on how to teach reading is based on a textbook; every one of those textbooks is written by one of the high priests of the word method. In the old days it was impossible to keep a good teacher from following her own common sense and practical knowledge; today the phonetic system



of teaching reading is kept out of our schools as effectively as if we had a dictatorship with an all-powerful Ministry of Education.

The educators were furious with Flesch. He had made them appear stupid and incompetent. They knew they were not stupid. They had pulled off the greatest conspiracy against intelligence in history. Although Dewey, Thorndike and Cattell were dead, their disciples, Arthur I. Gates at Columbia and William Scott Gray at the University of Chicago, were determined to carry on the work of their mentors. In 1955, the professors of reading organized the International Reading Association to maintain the dominance of look-say in primary reading instruction. Today, look-say permeates the educational marketplace so thoroughly and in so many guises, and it is so widely and uncritically accepted, that it takes expert knowledge/to know the good from the bad, useful from the harmful. ]

But Flesch had not been the first to inform the educators that what they were doing was wrong. The first to do that was Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist, who in 1929 published an article in the Journal of Educational Psychology entitled "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability." In it Orton wrote:

I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer here do not apply to the use of the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life.

Had the educators been genuinely concerned with the academic and psychological welfare of their students they would have changed their plans to impose look-say, the sight method, on the schools of America. But I fear that they took Dr. Orton's findings as confirmation that what they intended to do would work as they wanted it to: that is destroy literacy skills, create learning blockages, dumb down the nation.

Today their success can be measured in terms of declining SAT scores and academic achievement to the point where we are now a

Nation at Risk with an education system being swamped by a rising tide of mediocrity. Even the best students have fallen victim to this dumbing down process. In a speech given to the California Library Association in 1970, Karl Shapiro, the eminent poet-professor who had taught creative writing for over 20 years told his audience:

What is really distressing is that this generation cannot and does not read. I am speaking of university students in what are supposed to be our best universities. Their illiteracy is staggering. . . . We are experiencing a literacy breakdown which is unlike anything I know of in the history of letters.

What I have been trying to tell this audience is that this literary breakdown is no accident, it is not the result of ignorance or incompetence, it has been, in fact, deliberately created by our progressive-humanist-behaviorist educators whose social agenda is far more important to them than anything connected with academic excellence. Perhaps their mindset was best expressed by psychologist Arthur W. Combs in an essay entitled "Humanistic Goals of Education" published in 1975. Dr. Combs writes:

Modern education must produce far more than persons with cognitive skills. It must produce humane individuals . . . . The humane qualities are absolutely essential to our way of life -- far more important, even, than the learning of reading, for example. We can live with a bad reader; a bigot is a danger to everyone.

The inference, of course, is that you can't have both good readers and humane persons, that one must be sacrificed for the other. Note also the very subtle suggestion that high literacy may even produce bigotry. If this is what the humanists believe, then how can we expect them to promote high literacy?

Incidentally, the progressive-humanist-behaviorist mindset also has profound political implications that threaten our freedoms. Our Declaration of Independence states "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Well, if there is no Creator, as our hymanist educators believe, then there are no unalienable rights. Dewey wrote in Liberalism and Social Action:

When (Bentham) disallowed the doctrine of inalienable individual natural rights, he removed, as far as theory is concerned, the obstacle to positive action by the state whenever it can be shown that the general well-being will be promoted by such action.

*So much for unalienable rights. Getting back to the matter of literacy,*  
In 1935 Dewey wrote:

The last stand of oligarchical and anti-social seclusion is perpetuation of this purely individualistic notion of intelligence.

To kill this individualistic intelligence which is the source of excellence, Dewey and his behaviorist colleagues proceeded to strip

education of mind, soul, and literacy. In 1930 the percentage of illiteracy among white persons of native birth was 1.5. Among foreign-born whites it was 9.9 percent, and among Negroes it was 16.3. Among urban blacks the illiteracy rate was 9.2 percent.

Today the illiteracy rate among urban blacks is probably about 40 percent, while the illiteracy rate among whites has been estimated to be from 7 to 30 percent. No one really knows the exact figure, including the Department of Education which <sup>has guessed</sup> ~~estimates~~ that there are about 23 million functional illiterates in America.

In 1935 a survey was made of ~~the~~ Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) enrollees. Of the 375,000 men studied, 7,369, or 1.9 percent, were found to be illiterate, that is, they could not read a newspaper or write a letter. That's a remarkably low rate of illiteracy considering ~~the fact~~ that most of the men who joined the CCC were in the low socio-economic group.

Today, our schools are creating an ever-increasing underclass of citizens without employable skills who turn to crime or welfare for sustenance. Their illiteracy makes them misfits in an industrial, high-tech society. The irony is that they acquire their illiteracy in school from teachers who have themselves been miseducated by their professors of education.

Education Week of January 30, 1985 reported that more than half the students in grades 3, 5 and 8 in the schools of Philadelphia need remedial help. Why? <sup>No explanation was given</sup> ~~Education Week didn't explain why~~, but the answer is that the teachers of Philadelphia are using teaching methods that Dr. Orton warned about in 1929 and Dr. Flesch exposed in 1955.

In fact, Dr. Flesch wrote another book in 1981 entitled Why Johnny Still Can't Read. He wrote with some sadness:

Twenty-five years ago I studied American methods of teaching reading and warned against educational catastrophe. Now it has happened.

At the moment every state legislature in the nation is grappling with an education reform bill. I know of not one of them that has addressed this basic problem of primary reading instruction. They all seem convinced that merit pay, longer school days, smaller class size, more homework, career ladders, competency tests, higher pay for teachers, compulsory kindergarten and more preschool facilities will give us excellence. But they won't for one very significant reason. The academic substance of public education today is controlled lock, stock and barrel by behavioral psychologists, and they don't believe in excellence. The American classroom has been transformed into a psych lab and the function of a psych lab is not academic excellence.

If education consists of the interaction between an effective teacher and a willing learner, then you can't have it in a psych lab which has neither. In the lab you have the trainer and the trainee, the controller and the controlled, the experimenter and the subject, the therapist and the patient. What should go on in a classroom is teaching and learning. What goes on in the psych lab is stimulus and response, diagnosis and treatment.

Many people think that behaviorism is simply the study of behavior.



But, according to B.F. Skinner, behaviorism is a theory of knowledge, in which knowing and thinking are regarded merely as forms of behavior. Although psychology was supposed to be the study of the life of the psyche -- the mind -- behaviorists, starting with Thorndike, reduced the functions of the mind to where today the mind ceases to be a factor in education. Behavioral objectives are the goals of today's teachers.

Who killed excellence? Behavioral psychology did. Why? Because it is based on a lie: that man is an animal, without mind or soul, and can be taught as an animal. And that concept is based on an even greater lie: <sup>that</sup> there is no God, no Creator.

And so the future of American education rests on the resolution of profoundly philosophical questions, and apparently no compromise between the ruling behaviorists and the rebellious fundamentalists is possible. As long as the progressive-humanist-behaviorists control the graduate schools of education and psychology, the professional organizations and journals, and the processes whereby curricula are developed and textbooks written and published, there is <sup>little</sup> ~~no~~ possibility that public education can achieve academic excellence.

It is the better part of wisdom to admit that the government schools are the permanent captives of the behaviorists who also seem to control the sources of public and private funding that sustain them. They <sup>seem to be</sup> ~~are~~ impervious to the pressures for excellence. <sup>There is a growing belief that</sup> The solution lies in abandoning <sup>government</sup> ~~public~~ education and transferring our energies and resources to the private sector thereby expanding <sup>opportunity + entrepreneurship.</sup> ~~the sphere of~~ educational freedom. The American people want better education. They ought to be able to get it. But to do so they will

have to sweep away whatever obstacles to excellence the educators have erected. In fact, that is the problem — how to breakdown, overcome or circumvent the obstacles to excellence.

The exodus of children from the public schools is an indication that this is already happening. But the millions of children who <sup>in the government schools</sup> remain are at risk, in danger of becoming the functional illiterates, the underclass of tomorrow. Can we save them? We have the knowledge to do so.

But do we have the <sup>will</sup> ~~means~~? The next few years will provide the answer.

<sup>Gunnette • Russell Kirk</sup>  
You've heard from Graham Down, Raymond English + Eileen Gardner what must be done to achieve excellence. But <sup>will</sup> ~~can~~ their ideas find their way into classroom practice? That's the question still to be answered.