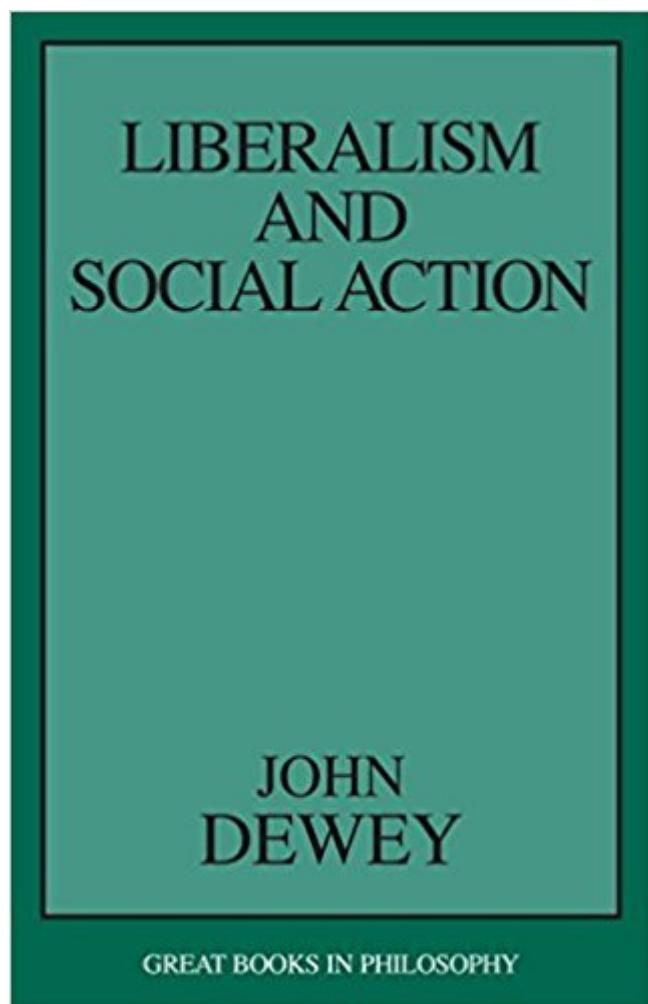


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# Liberalism And Social Action (Great Books In Philosophy)



## **Synopsis**

In this, one of Dewey's most accessible works, he surveys the history of liberal thought from John Locke to John Stuart Mill, in his search to find the core of liberalism for today's world. While liberals of all stripes have held to some very basic values-liberty, individuality, and the critical use of intelligence-earlier forms of liberalism restricted the state function to protecting its citizens while allowing free reign to socioeconomic forces. But, as society matures, so must liberalism as it reaches out to redefine itself in a world where government must play a role in creating an environment in which citizens can achieve their potential. Dewey's advocacy of a positive role for government-a new liberalism-nevertheless finds him rejecting radical Marxists and fascists who would use violence and revolution rather than democratic methods to aid the citizenry.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

John Dewey (1859-1952) authored more than two dozen books and scores of articles in both scholarly and popular publications. He rightly deserves the title of America's foremost philosopher and his work will influence intellectuals throughout the world for many years to come.

Some authors are so original, cultivated, and write so well that we may enjoy reading their work even when we have serious reservations about the views they express. Among the most informative and engaging of the few so endowed, John Dewey occupies a privileged place. Dewey writes with the authority of a philosopher whose brilliance was long committed to investigating and helping to

shape the social, political, and economic world of the last decades of the Nineteenth Century and the first half of the Twentieth. To read Dewey is to see the world he lived in through a new and different lens, one that illuminates prevailing institutions in ways that were previously obscured by taken-for-granted conventions and shop-worn ideas. One important reason for the excellence of Dewey's offerings is his commitment to being actively engaged in the organizational arrangements he was trying to better understand. As such, Dewey's work was practical in the best sense, recognizing that abstruse ruminations made from a safe distance produce obfuscation rather than objectivity. *Liberalism and Social Action* was written in 1935, in the middle of the Great Depression, two years after Hitler came to power in Germany, and during a time when the Japanese were expanding their imperial domain throughout the South Pacific. Involvement of the U.S. in what was to be World War II was six years away, but in spite of pervasive isolationist sentiment, the prospect of America becoming embroiled in a brutal and costly conflict that spanned two continents was becoming more likely. In this perilous and painful time, Dewey sought to foster a renaissance in the ethos and application of Liberalism, transforming it from an outmoded and stagnant set of old ideas and obsolete standards into a dynamic intellectual foundation for making best use of the resources produced by a modern and modernizing society. That Dewey fails to acknowledge the myriad innovations and new ideas forged by FDR's New Deal is not explained. Perhaps Dewey judged the New Deal to be helter-skelter, lacking in a solid foundation, and likely transitory. And perhaps he thought the New Deal was too tame. Dewey acknowledged the contribution of Classical Liberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom and self-interested action unfettered by adventitious and stifling institutional constraints. However, he also recognized that the Jeffersonian ideal of a society of independent yeoman farmers and unaffiliated rugged individualists was no longer workable. Instead, developments in science and science-based technology had given rise to an industrial era where concentrations of wealth and power yielded a class-based social formation, one in which opportunity and material sustenance were artificially scarce, serving the interests of the favored few much as described by Thorstein Veblen in *The Engineers and the Price System*. In this environment, the traditional hands-off policies of Classical Liberalism left the vast majority of people powerless and needlessly lacking in the material and cultural means of day-to-day existence. Moreover, contemporary Liberalism with its interest in largely piecemeal economic reform was hampered by disorganization and an incoherent set of insufficiently ambitious objectives. For Dewey, a Liberalism that acknowledged the misuse and willful dampening of America's productive potential and proceeded in a systematic and rigorous way to seek durable remedies was both necessary and possible given new and emerging circumstances. Dewey was convinced that in a modern and

enormously productive industrial society, there could easily be plenty to go around. Citizens no longer needed be motivated by scarcity of essentials, but could realize their inherent potential through engagement in intellectual and physical activity in the world around them. Opportunity for self-realization was potentially abundant. Achieving these desired ends, however, could be accomplished only if Americans disabused themselves of their aversion to planned collective and centralized direction of the development of the social system. Government, citizens needed to acknowledge, was no longer the enemy. Government could be used by engaged participants to bring disciplined inquiry and intelligently informed application -- the ethos and method of science -- to accomplish an equitable distribution of resources in a way that benefited all, a not uncommon view at the time. For those who argue that centralized planning has been tried and it does not work, Dewey would argue that past failures could not avail themselves of present circumstances which may be much more conducive to the success of such efforts. Dewey valued individualism at least as much as the Classical Liberals, but he held that individuals were inherently social, and that their individualism became manifest through functionally significant activity with their fellow citizens. For those who held that rewards commensurate with the contributions of the best and the brightest would not be forthcoming in a context devoid of special incentives, Dewey invoked the notion of social intelligence. This means that we are all thoroughly integrated into a social system that, for example, enables us to travel from New York to Los Angeles in a few hours, a trip that in the middle of the Nineteenth Century took months. The real differences among us have to do with differential access to the products of social intelligence, and Dewey dismissed the importance of measures of purported individual merit, such as IQ. Toward the end of Liberalism and Social Action, Dewey takes great pains to distinguish his renewed Liberalism from the sort of classless society that Marxists seek. In truth, however, whatever the differences, the similarities between Dewey's society based on the integration of scientific rigor into all institutions and the sort of social system that Marxists think is eminently possible and desirable became more numerous and striking as Dewey goes along. Dewey was convinced that the failure of his brand of thoroughgoing liberalism was what an influential sociologist of his time, William F. Ogburn, would have called "cultural lag." Dewey seemed convinced that the lag would be made up, and rational use of our collectively held resources would make it possible for all of us to become fully developed individuals in a just society that was capable of maintaining its exemplary character by scientifically adjusting to changing circumstances. Dewey, however, was a realist, and I think I've probably made his views more utopian than they really were. Still, if Dewey were alive today, he'd have to acknowledge that the same arguments on behalf of Classical Liberalism are being dogmatically made by Libertarians, Conservatives, and most

professional economists. If anything, we are farther from his scientifically planned and directed society than in his day, and his understanding of social intelligence and its implications are alien to contemporary political discourse. Even in our schools, Dewey's special domain, the absurdly heavy emphasis on standardized tests has given priority to knowing an isolated fact rather than being able to find and follow a useful course of action. Test-driven schooling is an extension of the stupidity documented by Raymond Callahan in *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, and it brings to mind many of the things that Dewey objected to in the schools of his day. I enjoyed Liberalism and Social Action, and I would recommend it to others. Unfortunately, however, when Dewey becomes prescriptive he acknowledges but badly underestimates the entrenched and powerful special interests he's up against. I think that his more critically evaluative book *The Public and Its Problems* does a better job of showing us where we are without offering unattainable outcomes. Sometimes even a genius comes up a bit short.

This book is a pleasure to read. For one, it's written with the same clarity and insight that often characterizes pragmatic thought. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Dewey's analysis of liberalism, its roots, and its potential as a vehicle for social change are as important now as they were when this book was written. The crux of Dewey's argument is simple. The goal of government should be to promote the realization of individual capacity and the free exercise of intelligence. These ends, according to Dewey, are better served through active governance informed by scientific method than through traditional free market style liberalism (which we might now recognize as libertarianism). He believed that the function of liberalism should be to promote these ends through (what else?) organized intelligence and not through violence. His main idea aside, Dewey does a great deal to distinguish the robust school of liberalism from the substantially more constraining political ideologies organized under the labels of socialism, communism, republicans, and democrats. Likewise, though perhaps beyond Dewey's initial conception, his thoughts could go a long way towards distinguishing the richness of liberalism from the simplified brand of liberalism that it has become. Considering the somewhat abortive efforts of contemporary liberals (occupiers, libertarians, etc...) towards effecting systemic social change, Dewey's thoughts are all the more important. If my review is somewhat lacking in a clear explanation of how that social change may be brought about, keep in mind that Dewey's thoughts are far more lucid than my own. This book deserves a greater place in history than it has received.

Dewey was recommended to me by my brother. What a refreshing book, written over 100 years

ago, we are still dealing with the same issues and ideas. Dewey slays dragons on both the right and the left with deft and subtle arguments. Often he pulls apart an argument - some that would be very familiar today! - and demonstrates the strength and weaknesses each point. He takes on Marx at his most vulnerable, the need for violence to institute change. He takes on all and any Ideology as becoming the launching point for totalitarian rule. He argues for both the "old" and the "new" forms of liberalism, what we would call free market and socialism and calls again for a liberalism that Liberates the common man from the chains of exploitation whether by the king, the lord, the manager or the state. Highly recommended, one of the most important books I've read in 10 years.

This review pertains to the Prometheus Books, 2000 edition. If for no other reason than this one book, it alone would secure Dewey's place as one of early America's most talented philosophers. But Dewey didn't stop with just this book, *Experience and Nature*, *Freedom and Culture*, and *Knowing and the Known* just to mention a few of Dewey's works that positioned him as one of the leaders in the philosophy of pragmatism.

To say this man was the best American philosopher of the last century is laughable. He was entrenched in his twisted liberalism and failed to get Locke and the founding correct. He wasn't even close. Natural rights of the colonists were secondary to the well being of the community. Whenever Christ and His word is left out of society, chaos and immorality reign and leads to what America is today.

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