

JOHN DEWEY'S ETHICS: DEMOCRACY AS EXPERIENCE

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Looking at the great number of books that deal with the work of John Dewey, one may notice a very interesting issue—it is very hard to find a book wholly devoted to a systematic treatment of Dewey's moral philosophy. An answer to the question of why this is the case is to be found a few lines below. More importantly, it is not such a long time ago that the reader could have come across a treatise that apparently tries to change this unfortunate situation. Gregory F. Pappas' extensive book *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy As Experience* (Bloomington, IN: 2008, 341 pp.) not only displays the ambition to become a comprehensive treatment of a certain strand of John Dewey's philosophy, but what is more, it could also be read as a kind of apology for pragmatism's legacy in the field of moral philosophy—one, that has always been, say—a highly unsafe territory for the representatives of this American intellectual movement. Pragmatists have never been those who were called for when moral problems were discussed in the philosophical arena. Up to this day, it has been a common conviction that pragmatist ethics, if there is such a thing, due to its relativism and blunt utilitarianism, cannot provide us with viable solutions to moral issues. Since moral problems, as with any other issues in philosophy, have to be answered with an unshakeable certainty—pragmatism, thanks to its subjectivist nature, is completely out of the game here. Struggling with this opinion has been, on the other hand, one of John Dewey's lifelong professional goals. Gregory Pappas' work thus aspires to map very thoroughly one of the most important battles in which Dewey ever became engaged.

The work consists of three main chapters further divided into thirteen parts in all. The first chapter called "Moral Theory and Experience" presents a more general reflection of Dewey's meta-ethical and methodological views. At the same time, Pappas recognizably pays special attention to the issue of properly placing Dewey's pragmatist ethical theories in the right spot with respect to other approaches such as cognitivism or various kinds of reductionism. Together with this, Pappas also tries to outline his own, sometimes quite specific understanding of Dewey's empiricism (which he closely connects to William James' radical empiricism). This kind of empiricism attributed to Dewey has further implications for Pappas' description of the Deweyan conception of primary (moral) experience. The second part is mostly devoted to an informed description of the concepts that play a key role in Dewey's moral philosophy such as habits, behavior, moral deliberation, character and others. What is especially valuable about this chapter is Pappas' treatment of the aspects of moral life that many contemporary ethical theories leave broadly unattended, such as creativity, reconstruction, emotionality, sociality, etc.

The subject of the last chapter called “The Ideal Moral Life” is the concept of what we could call normative ethics and normative politics. Here Pappas tries to display the existence of the necessary continuum between Dewey’s notion of ethics, experience and democracy—all of them making up the very core of his concept of genuine moral life. Interestingly, the “grounding” of such normative moral philosophy is found in Dewey’s radical contextualism. As we can notice then, Pappas’ book not only endeavors to comprehensively explain the whole of Dewey’s ethics, but besides that it frequently revolves around expounding the most basic pragmatist concepts in moral philosophy, which (considering today’s frequent misrepresentation of them) is always a very worthy effort. Although it is not only in the area of moral philosophy that pragmatists’ statements and concepts have often oscillated too close by far to subjectivism and relativism, Gregory Pappas tries very hard to prove that these two approaches to ethics are in fact alien to Dewey’s thought.

However, before starting to examine Pappas’ book more closely, I would like to point to three difficulties that inevitably have to be challenged by any author writing a good treatise on Dewey’s ethics. The first problematic issue in dealing with this subject matter is the holistic nature of Dewey’s thought. In his works, Dewey always analyzed his subject in concentric circles in which the central themes of his philosophy were constantly re-examined from different angles. We might even dare say, that even if Dewey were to write now on the philosophy of science, metaphysics, axiology, theory of knowledge or whatever else, we can always recognize a distinctive ethical aspect that lies at the core of his issue. It is my distinct impression then, that writing on Dewey’s ethics often entails touching on (however lightly) almost all of the rest of his monumental work. The second problem in putting together a coherent picture of Dewey’s moral philosophy is the fact that Dewey never consolidated his ideas about ethics in any single book. The formulation of his mature ethical positions is thus often found in textbooks or syllabi never intended to be a systematic treatment of the matter. The last challenge to any author writing on Dewey’s ethics has, again, a lot to do with the nature of Dewey’s work. What I mean is the insubstantiality of his approach to moral philosophy. Unlike the majority of moral philosophers throughout centuries, Dewey’s moral thought does not rest on a definite set of postulates, imperatives or arguments in the strict sense of the word. On the contrary, this aforementioned substantialist approach to ethics is often the subject of harsh criticism in Dewey’s work, which, on the other hand, makes Dewey’s own positive statements about morality quite difficult to discriminate and—as a result—even more difficult to articulate. As we can see, it is not at all easy to put forth a comprehensive treatment of an issue as complex as Dewey’s moral philosophy undoubtedly is.

As mentioned above, the first chapter of Pappas’ work could well be read as a meta-ethical and at the same time methodological contemplation on Dewey’s ethics. In his attempt to delimitate Dewey’s ethics in relation to other similar approaches to moral philosophy (like naturalism, reductionism, utilitarianism etc.) the author chose apparently the most effective way of doing so, namely—a kind of negative definition. Considering what is written a few lines above, the most user-friendly way of saying what Dewey’s moral philosophy (and even his philosophy in general) in the broadest sense is, is simply to say—what it is not. Since pragmatists can often be viewed as mere followers of reductionist tendencies in modern positivist science (and as a matter of fact, superficial readings of Dewey frequently lead to such interpretations), the author appropriately corrects some misrepresentations of Dewey’s doctrine of pragmatic naturalism. Finally, the outcome of Pappas’ attempt to delimitate the conceptual area of pragmatist ethics is defined by the following terms: *empiricism, Darwinism, scientific approach to inquiry, naturalism, social psychology*. Although the author quite successfully

undermines the claim that pragmatism is just another kind of reductionism and manages very well to place pragmatism in the right place in relation to all the remaining theories, it is my impression, that he has still omitted one of the most important features of Dewey's approach, namely—*instrumentalism*. This is even more surprising when we consider how close instrumentalism (in Dewey's understanding at least) actually is to science *an sich*. As far as I know, pragmatism is the only philosophy (of those mentioned above) that emphasizes the crucial role of instrumental and reconstructive dimension in science in such a way. What is the basic relationship between science and experience—the central concept of Dewey's philosophy? In what kind of situations do we directly experience science at work? Those and some other crucial questions remain unanswered. This problem is unfortunately symptomatic for the entire first chapter. In my opinion, for those readers less familiar with Dewey and pragmatism in general it would be far better to thoroughly deal with these sorts of questions right at the start.

Nevertheless, Pappas correctly goes on to describe the very starting point of Dewey's account of ethics, which is naturally—*experience*. The author relates Dewey's concept of primary experience to William James' notion of radical empiricism, obviously in order to stress the qualitative, immediate dimension of our everyday, practical experience. It is important to keep in mind though, that this sort of empiricism differs radically from other forms of classical empiricism. The distinctive feature of pragmatic empiricism, and at the same time one that is crucial for all philosophy, is its *practical stance*. What practical stance means is that we can never find ourselves outside experience, because we are always situated in it as agents. This features of *action* and our active attitude towards what is an experienced stand in sharp contrast to, for example, British empiricists, who can be said to have taken the opposite stance, namely—the *theoretical* one. It can be said that the theoretical stance (in Dewey's opinion symptomatic almost to all representatives of Western philosophy) is motivated by the so called *spectator theory of knowledge*, and debunked so convincingly by Dewey in *Quest for Certainty*. Here, however, it is not my goal to deal with this question. On the other hand, the reason I mentioned it is because on the basis of these concepts, Pappas draws another, quite important, Deweyan distinction between *primary* and *secondary moral experience*. The distinction between the practical and theoretical stance can be said to bear significant similarities towards the distinction between primary and secondary experience (including the moral one) in general. Pappas as well as Dewey reproaches most moral philosophers for unjustifiably favoring the secondary (speculative, reflective, conceptualized) dimension of experience at the expense of the primary (pre-reflective, lived, directly experienced) one. However as Pappas points out, the primary experience is necessarily always a broader concept than secondary experience. Why? Simply because of the foremost feature of human being-in-the-world, and that is action. Because of the necessarily active human attitude toward the world, our theoretical constructs and conceptual schemes not only come into being because of our need to solve practical problems in our direct (primary) everyday experience but in the same way they return there to stand the test of practical efficacy. Most ethical theorists have neglected these non-cognitive, pluralistic and in a way—incommensurable aspects of moral life, because they are of no use in constructing a theoretically coherent system that can presumably provide solutions to moral problems. This (theoretical) demand to construct a single theory encompassing the whole realm of moral life is exactly what has systematically led philosophical ethics astray from their very beginning in antiquity. Pappas very correctly points out that no matter whether it is Platonism, cultural relativism, or scientism, a theoretical standpoint that explains away the reality of our immediate experience is always present.

On the contrary, the pragmatist approach finds its beginning at the point where scientific inquiry starts, that is—in practical confrontations with problems in our everyday experience. Dewey was greatly aware of the fact that everyday lived experience differs dramatically from theoretical constructions. Unlike the stability, abstraction and purity of a great number of ethical theories, in primary experience we are confronted with changeability, uniqueness and the earthiness of everyday situations. This is also the reason why Dewey was strongly convinced of our need to work out the kind of ethical theory that is able to take into consideration these above-mentioned generic traits of our primary experience. It is doubtful that the uniqueness of each situation can be captured by a set of rules, no matter how exhaustive. Therefore, we should look for a theory that is able to reflect the concreteness and particularity of moral practice.

What should be deeply appreciated about Pappas' work at this point is his thorough comparison of Dewey's ethics to those of contemporary representatives of situation ethics like Jonathan Dancy. In this respect, Pappas is able to explain the (dis-)similarities of both approaches very clearly and, what is more, all of it is done in a much more interesting way than previous descriptions of Dewey's own positions. What is also very important is Pappas' underlining of the rules/principles distinction, one that is, by the way, one of the very few positive guiding "doctrines" by Dewey about moral deliberation.

After the first, rather propedeutic, chapter Pappas goes on to the very conceptual core of his whole work, which is Dewey's view of moral experience. Here, a lot of issues not dealt with in the first chapter are rigorously explored. What should be especially appreciated at this point is Pappas' explanation of the place occupied by morality and moral problems in experience in general. Pappas, along with Dewey, points out that we should not think of moral skills as being completely detached from the rest of our practical skills like medicine, cookery or playing baseball. This statement, however appalling it may sound to representatives of moral realism, fits very well into the whole fabric of Dewey's philosophy. Again, what we can see in the background of the whole issue is the difference between practical and theoretical approaches in solving philosophical problems. Dewey uncovers moral problems as problems in practical experience that cannot, however, be precisely delimited within it. We simply do not know where morality begins, there are no clear and fixed boundaries between what is and what is not moral experience. On the other hand, what we do know is that cases of moral deliberation bear significant similarities to solving problematic situations in general. This is the point where Pappas finds continuity between the notion of Jamesian radical empiricism and Dewey's concept of scientific inquiry. As well as other types of situations in which humans as actors find themselves—morally problematic situations are also unique, pluralistic, disturbing and highly individualized. In a very insightful manner, Pappas points out that, given all this, it is useless if not even absurd, to try to find a classical essence or definition (in such a way as to come up with sufficient and necessary conditions for the term) of moral problems. Why? Because when we take the radical empiricist attitude towards moral problems we suddenly find that they are always experienced *as a concrete problem in action* rather than as a moral problem in general. When we experience a moral problem it is more accurate to say that we *are suffering* a moral problem than to say that we simply *have* it. In doing this, Pappas deconstructs a very important dualism, i.e. the dualism of rationality and emotionality in moral philosophy.

Pappas also does a very good job mainly in comparing Dewey's approach to utilitarianism with other forms of consequentialism in general. This point of Pappas' is intended to do at least a twofold justice to Dewey: a) it seeks to clear up the issue of regarding pragmatism as just another kind of superficial utilitarianism and b) it shows very clearly, that considering Dewey a consequentialist would be a huge mistake. Dewey's argumentation against utilitarianism and

other forms of consequentialism displays the great complexity of his ethics. The main point Dewey makes against these approaches is that utilitarianism wrongly identifies the agreeable and disagreeable reactions to foreseen events that are present in the individual's imagination with the calculation of future pleasures and pains. In this respect, Dewey points out that while the former reactions are part of the individual's present situations, future pleasures and pains are not. Therefore utilitarians ask us to predict what is dependent on a complex set of contingent variables that are usually not subject to our control. However compelling this argument may look, in my estimation it is not entirely sound. If Dewey states that we cannot identify possible future pleasures and pains (since they are not in our control) with our qualitative evaluation of the present situation, of which it may be a part, it seems to me, that he is making a false distinction and in reality, he is just postponing the whole problem. What makes me say this is simply the fact that there is actually a big difference between the validity of our *beliefs* about future pleasures and pains and the actual future facticity of pleasures and pains. We cannot control the facticity of future pleasures and pains, but in exactly the same way, our present beliefs about them also make no difference whatsoever as to their actual occurrence. So they are both outside our control in the matter of their future actuality.

Nevertheless Dewey is most probably right about consequentialists overestimating our evaluation of the future consequences of our actions in the process of moral deliberation. Dewey states that even though we occasionally dwell on the future effects of our actions, by no means can we make this scheme a paradigm of all moral deliberation. What is more, even though we do not know much about Dewey's notion of moral deliberation as a reconstruction of experience; considering Dewey's frequent criticisms of contemporary narrow, calculative commercialism, it becomes obvious that we cannot reasonably label him any kind of utilitarianist or consequentialist.

There is not much to be said about the rest of the second chapter of the book. In general, it provides the reader with a logically ordered set of explanations regarding the crucial concepts in Dewey's moral philosophy. All through the chapter, Pappas is able to put forth a very clear picture of Dewey's deconstruction of traditional philosophical dualisms of philosophical optimism and pessimism, deontology and consequentialism, self and conduct etc. Dewey aimed to dissolve these dichotomies mainly because he was convinced that the history of ethics is nothing but a recurrent oscillation between extreme views, each trying to compensate for what the other failed to emphasize. According to Dewey, it is precisely this endless clash of downright opposites that makes intelligent and inclusive treatment of ethical issues impossible. For Dewey, even the most opposite aspects of moral deliberation (subject and object, feelings and obligations, means and ends, desires and duties etc.) are often present within the context of one single situation. In my opinion, Pappas' treatment of the Deweyan concept of the moral self is also of crucial importance. Pappas' view of this issue also stems from undermining traditional dualisms, in this case it is the dualism of subject and action (in moral issues—moral character and moral conduct), postulating a moral self that is situated outside and prior to the process of moral deliberation. From the Deweyan perspective, the moral self never stands apart from the situation of moral deliberation, in fact it is the most important constitutive aspect of it. Dewey shared with G. H. Mead the opinion that the human self emerges from a natural process of social interaction, thus it can never be separated neither from its social nor environmental context. In this respect, what is distinctive for Dewey in contrast to Mead is that Dewey thought of the human self (more in a Jamesian manner) as an organization of habits. The basic way in which we acquire our moral dispositions (and consequently a moral self) is thus through developing habits as a way of interacting within the social and natural environment. When these

habits are disrupted, thinking and inquiry comes about and this is precisely what we call moral deliberation. The reorganization of habits, however, also means the reorganization of the self. In other words, the character (self) and conduct are just two sides of the same coin. The moral self is an embodied and acculturated agent with habits; the self is inseparable from its relationships and acts. As a result, this finding undermines the subjectivist claim that moral experience is something to be described as the content of one's consciousness. In Dewey's approach moral experience always requires more than is present in our minds, there is always more to it; if it were not so, inquiry could not take place. But since the context of morally problematic situations always exceeds our immediate cognitive capacities there is always something to explore in order to help us deal with it. Moreover, almost every situation contains in itself a certain means to its own solution. Dewey's concept of moral self plays a crucial role in Pappas' further treatment of Deweyan normative ethics and one that we are now moving on to.

The final chapter of Pappas' book is an attempt at a systematic treatment of John Dewey's normative ethics. Since Dewey never came up with anything like this, for many authors, the most viable way of approaching the task of presenting a coherent view of Dewey's normative ethics would be to return to the notion of situation and the main features of human conduct within it. Pappas, however, takes the opposite path and approaches it from a more general point of view, characterizing Dewey's ethics using three key concepts: intelligence, aesthetics and democracy. There is no doubt that this is a correct representation of what is actually going on in Dewey's philosophy. However, the notion of an aesthetic approach to moral life deserves to be examined a bit more closely. It is very likely that by emphasizing the aesthetic dimension of Dewey's ethics (considering that Dewey's interest later moved towards aesthetics), Pappas actually succeeded in presenting an accurate interpretation of Dewey's most mature ethical ideas. An aesthetic and creative attitude towards morality and experience in general not only dominates all of Pappas' work, but contributes significantly to what Dewey had in mind when he wrote on ethics. The aesthetic dimension of morality in Dewey's work refers to qualitative aspects of experience and to the inherently meaningful forms of engagement within it. This becomes quite visible when we consider for example Dewey's criticism of the deontological schools in ethics. What specifically troubled Dewey about the ethics of duty was mainly the way in which it was practically executed in the process of moral deliberation. If we think of morality and its principles as a set of rules mechanically imposed on our conduct from outside ourselves, in Dewey's view, we lose what is most precious about it, i.e. the aesthetic dimension of morality. When moral ideas degenerate into external rules they lose their capacity to fruitfully assist us in our moral life and become rather a kind of obstacle preventing us from carrying out a fresh exploration of a morally problematic situation. A necessary aspect of moral life is thus also a critical and reflective (artistic) use of our moral ideas if we continuously reflect upon them in light of present experience. This artistic approach to morality is something that Dewey has in common with European philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Gianni Vattimo or Michel Foucault. However, while these European thinkers (Nietzsche in particular) can be considered to have introduced the programme of ethics as a kind of aesthetic approach to life situations, Dewey was able to elaborate a concrete guideline of how to actually achieve it in both the personal and social dimension of our lives. The very notion of an aesthetic approach to morality anticipates the refinement of the creative, open and sensitive features of our personality. This is why Pappas, in the last part of his book, attempts to specify which features Dewey particularly had in mind. In Pappas' opinion those are: openness, courage, sensitivity, appreciation, conscientiousness and sympathy. It could be said that another feature, symptomatic of Pappas' analysis, is the notion of *balance*—the author proves very clearly that the central aspect of a

pragmatic treatment of an individual's personal qualities is finding an appropriate middle course between (always more or less reductionist) sharp alternatives. Cultivating these characteristics contributes to a flourishing of what Dewey called the *wider self*, i.e. a self whose interests, cares and concerns are expansive, open and inclusive. Dewey was convinced that these features of our personalities have always been quite naturally sustained firstly in our family relations, and secondly in the local communities of which we tend to be natural constituent parts.

However, with the rapid development of industrial capitalism, the aforementioned natural relations became disjointed. Pappas correctly noticed that Dewey's criticism of superficial capitalism and blunt consumerism was in many aspects prophetic of that which we can experience today. It seems that our contemporary notion of democracy has been reduced in meaning to a mere mechanism of the periodical election of a government. What good is a society where no one is prevented from participating, but where nonetheless no one even bothers to? Where everyone can be a citizen but no one wants to be? These are the problems that Pappas apparently addresses with great concern. Discussing these questions, it seems that despite the few sentences devoted to it, Pappas significantly underestimates the reconstructive and democratic potential of the internet and new means of communication. Although he is apparently right in saying that the new means of communication lack some of the important characteristics of democratic participation, their reconstructive and sometimes even subversive character is vital and conducive to democratic process and cannot be denied. Nevertheless, the new means of communication by themselves are hardly sufficient to transform society to its democratic ideal. What, then, is the grounding for such a social transformation? The question can be answered in at least two ways, both of which involve a revitalization of our relationships. The first is the revitalization of local associations and communities, in other words—what is required is the restoration of the relations that were previously damaged by the era of precipitant economic and industrial development leading to boundless individualism. The second possible grounding, somehow derivative of the first one, is establishing the "Great Community" that Dewey, and for example G. H. Mead (who considerably influenced Dewey in these matters), called for. In some of his essays, Mead envisions a time where a means of communication will develop to such a level that everyone will be able to engage in the process of free and all-embracing social communication without restraint. Mead and Dewey both believed that we are capable of extending ourselves beyond our immediate physical limitations and relationships. Still, for this communication to take place, it is necessary to reconstruct our concept of community and participation. It should be noted that learning the proper concept of participation does not ever start in "society" in general, but it always finds its beginning in community, initially in family relations. Thus, when we think of Dewey's normative ethics it is improper to see his pragmatism as a continuation of a Hegelian theme in social philosophy. As Pappas notices in his last chapters, rather quite the opposite is true.

To sum up, we can say, that Dewey as well as many other philosophers set his notion of democracy on metaphysical grounds. This, however, does not necessarily mean that his view of it is improbable, abstract or futile. On the contrary, owing to his thorough analysis of the process in which experience is constructed within our interactions with nature and with others, Dewey's ideas on democracy have quite solid empirical grounds and (what is more) imaginative appeal. When Richard Rorty wrote that it is impossible to come up with a philosophical justification of democracy, he was not entirely right. John Dewey did. In fact, giving philosophical justification to what he considered to be one of the most precious American values was probably Dewey's most significant professional goal. In his extensive work, Dewey set out a comprehensive normative vision of how we should live and organize our community and society. In his unique

work, Gregory F. Pappas reconstructs this vision with enormous clarity. Not only does Pappas provide us with an insightful reconstruction of all the important aspects of Dewey's ethics but, moreover, he is able to relate them to discussions in contemporary social thought. Gregory F. Pappas' book is lively proof of the fact that the social thought of John Dewey is still an immense inspiration in dealing with the most pressing issues of our days.

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