

John Dewey & James H. Tufts: ETHICS

Chapter XVI

(1) Morals and Social Problems

1. Dewey is attacking the idea that social life, ethics, and human nature itself are determined by nature, and properly likened to nature. Traditional societies ("stationary societies") dominated by custom view "the existing social order ... like the order of nature itself; as inevitable, and as nec or as capricious as the case may be." [478]

2. Dewey's 'social-historical relativism': cf. marked page 478.

3. "personal" vs. "social" morality. The latter is a byproduct of social conditions that force individuals to note the social conditions and consequences of their own actions.

4. Key: the content of moral judgment is determined by social conditions: "[Social morality] points out the material of reflection: the sort of things to which moral inquiry and judgment must go out." *and* social facts, like "the mere existence alone of democratic government" tend to determine the things to which 'moral inquiry and judgment must go out' since such facts raise "social issues for moral decision which did not exist for most men and women so long as government was autocratic and confined to a few." [479]

5. The origins of morality: the situation in which an individual must decide how to act under conditions that incorporate social conditions beyond his/her own interests and needs. Such social conditions present the individual with a problem, and that problem is the origin of morality: "His problem thus takes the form: What attitude shall I adopt towards an issue which concerns many persons whom I do not know personally, but whose action along with mine will determine the conditions under which we all live?" (JP: notice the overlap with my own reading of Plato's Myth of Gyges...morality only makes sense in a context of mutual dependency, which is why the person who is outside social life has no place in the moral universe).

6. Notice that as Dewey sees it, the emphasis of Mill on individuals and their liberties simply fails to address the main point of social morality: how to decide collectively what to do when collective actions are essential to the outcome of social life (Mill focuses entirely on the permanent interests of individuals in isolation from each other, and only considers their effects on each other as atomic particles in the moral universe, rather than having an *essentially social character* which has a reality of its own. Mill seems to assume that social life will take care of itself, and therefore needs no moral analysis except insofar as it might impinge on the needs and interests of individuals, who then seem to be the only moral entities worth considering).

Note: some in the class found Mill wanting precisely because he did not recognize that utilitarian theory and the harm principle ignore the fact that in some respects, every action of each and every individual has repercussions far beyond himself.

(2) The Underlying Issue: Individual and Social

1. "Unrestrained individuality vs. Social Control" is the topic here. Mill gets his face rubbed in the inadequacies of taking individuals as the only reality of social life. Dewey, on the other hand, sees a tension between two faces of the same coin of social reality: there is value both on the individual and the collective level, and interests on each side are bound up with the other. Each side has strengths and weaknesses:

Social control/Collective action	
Downside	Upside
Tends toward regimentation & mechanical uniformity	Overcomes the war of all against all arising from action based on self-love alone
Levelling: wipes out individual differences, leading to mediocrity	Civilizes what is otherwise, absent the influence of the collective, a mere animal
Favors censorship, meddling in private affairs	Promotes what exists only thru nurture, not nature
Hostile to free inquiry and thinking itself, since thought leads to critiques of the existing order, which is destabilizing	Individuals <i>become moralized</i> only thru this process of socializing thru the collective life
Fanaticism arising from efforts to maintain social conformity	Modern social problems require collective action to be fixed

Those who see only the negative side of collective action want to restrict it to a bare minimum (Mill), only to allow the collective to restrict the initiatives of private individuals only when harm to others will result (and then only so far as external effects arise from these initiatives....the domain of desire, emotion, thought and belief are to be left alone regardless and in all case--VINTAGE MILL!)

(3) Three Aspects of the Conflict

1. It is not useful to think of this in "individual vs. social" terms, since these are not opposed, but often mutually dependent and integrated aspects of human life (cf. last reading on the nature of individuality, here expressed as "Apart from the ties which bind him to others, he is nothing.").

"Only an unreal and impossible being, one completely isolated, disconnected, can be put in opposition to society" (Gyges with the ring!).[483]

2. Imagination and emotion are social artifacts due to "social connections which existed in the past".[483] Bold claim!

3. Upshot: again, we can't think about the problem of moral action if we employ *abstractions* that misrepresent the nature of the actual human life of action in which moral issues arise. Dewey tells us what really exists, underlying and misrepresented by these abstractions: "What do exist are conflicts between *some* individuals and *some* arrangements in social life; between groups and classes of individuals; between nations and races; between old traditions imbedded in institutions and new ways of thinking and acting which spring from those few individuals who depart from and who attack what is socially accepted. There is also a genuine difference of convictions as to the way in

which, at any given time, these conflicts should be met and managed. There are reasons for holding that they are best settled by private and voluntary action and also for holding that they are best settled by means of combined organized action. **No general theory about the individual and the social can settle conflicts or even point out the way in which they should be resolved.**"[my emphasis; 483]

4. "There is no single thing denominated 'society'; there are many societies, many forms of association."[484]

5. Dewey now offers a series of examples of general types of the conflicts that arise in society, between some groups and other groups, between factions of a particular group, between some individuals and other individuals, and between some groups and certain individuals. Here he tries to explain, in each case, how it came to be thought of as a conflict between society and individuals.

a. dominant (advantaged) vs. inferior (disadvantaged) groups

Interpreted as conflict between society and individuals because:

superior groups always think they represent the social world as a whole, and tend to think those opposed are merely acting on individual interests
inferior groups lack organization (part of their disadvantaged social position), and so seem to look more like they express only the interests of the individuals that make them (loosely) up

challengers to the social order (coming from the inferior group, but not only) tend to be viewed as individuals rebelling, since it takes awhile for new values to become accepted and thus associated with the social world as a whole (conserving old values looks 'social', promoting new values looks 'individualistic' since the future social order cannot yet be seen by most people)

superior groups write the histories (!)

b. when societies are decaying, the old order can look like mere chains that imprison individuals since it is satisfying fewer and fewer members of the existing order.

Result: "intense moral individualism" e.g. Rousseau, Tolstoi (Thoreau, Gandhi!)

c. when a society is burdened with the consequences of a now-deceased social order, the result is the reverse of the (b).

those in favor of fixing the order are associated with collective interests and actions, since the change requires it (for institutions borne from the now-defunct past are overwhelming individual initiatives).

those opposed to fixing the order become associated with individual interests (the monarchists of England in the 1600s).

since in such societies the social world is so decayed that nothing is quite working well (Carlyle's "anarchy plus the constable" situation), what success that anyone enjoys (those lucky enough to be affiliated with that order, and benefiting from it) appears to arise through individual initiative alone, and so these become seen as "individualists", whereas those opposed to it tend to think that they cannot, by individual action alone, change things, and thus become associated with "collectivism".

Notice that in (a) and (b) what is promoting change is identified as "individualist", and resisting it

"collectivist", whereas the reverse is true in (c).

Dewey's point: *the particular facts of the cases explain the how the false dichotomy of the individual world vs. the social world is applied, and nothing else.* "Neither 'social' nor 'individual,' in general, has any fixed meaning. All morality (including immorality) is both individual and social:--individual in its immediate inception and execution, in the desires, choices, dispositions from which conduct proceeds; social in its occasions, material, and consequences. That which is regarded as anti-social and immoral at one time is hailed later on as the beginning of great and beneficent social reform--as is seen in the fate of those moral prophets who were condemned as criminals only to be honored later as benefactors of the race." [487]

6. Dewey denies moral relativism nonetheless!: "These facts do not signify that there is no enduring criterion for [moral] judgment but that this criterion is to be found in consequences, and not in some general conception of individual and social." Consequentialism is a brand of utilitarianism, but in Dewey's hands it is more than only this, since he denies that there is any such thing as "individual interest" outside the context of *some* social life *or other*, and thus that we cannot merely look at consequences to individuals in assessing the moral dimension of a given situation.

7. Dewey offers three ways to morally analyze a social problem, based on the foregoing:

- i) First, in terms of a possible struggle between the dominant class and a rising class or group
- ii) Second, in terms of a possible conflict between old and new forms and modes of association and organization
- iii) Third, in terms of a possible conflict between an emphasis on voluntary private efforts and organized action involving public agencies

(i) is the conflict between "class and mass" was seen in the transition (witnessed in England and elsewhere in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries) from autocratic to democratic rule.

(ii) is the conflict between "conservative and liberal" and is seen in all phases of life, in all groups and among all individuals to one degree or another.

(iii) is the conflict between the extension and the limitation of public action, and is manifest wherever the possibility of government action applies. At extremes: anarchism on one end, state socialism on the other. Where have we ended up so far?

(4) The Problem of Method

1. Dewey denies moral universality: such a stance "would assume the existence of final and unquestionable knowledge upon which we can fall back in order to settle automatically every moral problem. It would involve the commitment to a dogmatic theory of morals." [488]

2. In rejecting moral universality, Dewey is rejecting one method (the method of abstract moral reasoning) in favor of another (what he calls the "experimental", the "method of democracy"). His method: "implies that reflective morality demands observation of particular situations, rather than fixed adherence to *a priori* principles; that free inquiry and freedom of publication and discussion must be encouraged and not merely grudgingly tolerated; that opportunity at different times and places must be given for trying different measures so that their effects may be capable of observation and comparison with one another." (jp: as is done in experimental science when testing explanations of the natural order).

3. The rejected method has been employed in support of various positions, but "the logic of the various positions is that while an open mind may be desirable in respect to physical truths, a completely settled and closed mind is needed in moral matters." [489]

4. Precedent has a place in this morality via democratic methods, but only instrumentally (for its usefulness) as guideposts, not as rules to strictly follow. So does authority (just as there is authority in the developed sciences...authority that can be *challenged* when necessary, i.e., when "evidence is presented calling for a reexamination of their findings and theories", [489] and thus which is nonabsolute).

5. Dewey's reply to those who think this amounts to a blind obeisance to present conditions of social life: "It is a caricature to suppose that emphasis upon the social character of morality leads to glorification of contemporary conditions just as they are. the position does insist that morals, to have vitality, must be related to these conditions or be up in the air." [490]

(5) Historic Individualism

Here Dewey analyzes the movement called "individualism" (that was a major force in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in Europe and the United States, and countries whose social life was somehow brought under the influence of Europe or the USA, at least, and was essentially invented in the 18th century by various thinkers, including Jefferson, Mill, Bentham, Rousseau). Have class form groups to lay out what individualism maintained, and what were, according to Dewey, the "definite causes for its appearance and its growth". (cf. pp. 491-497)

Then discuss Dewey's critique of the later application of individualism to maintain an unfair status quo. Is Dewey right?