

4/11/11

I. Dewey on Purpose of Society

- a. Three options:
 - (i) society exists for individuals
 - (ii) individuals exist to satisfy ends determined by society
 - (iii) the two are in an organic, correlative relation
- b. One common defect of all three theories:

All these theories discuss society/individuals in terms of *general concepts*: they amount to analyses of general concepts in hopes of answering questions about what to do about the *particular* individuals and institutions that fall under them. In short, they are *too abstract* and *distant* from the *particular* perplexities whose existence in domestic/social life *leads to an interest in social philosophy*.

Such theories "are general answers supposed to have a universal meaning that covers and dominates all particulars. Hence they do not assist inquiry. They close it.....They tell us about *the* state when we want to know about *some* state." [464]

- JP: Three things to notice here:
- A. Notice my emphasis this semester on the twin roles of his/her philosophical heritage and contemporary historical circumstances in determining what a particular philosopher thinks about the moral implications of state, the individual, and the fundamental character of social life. Dewey is noticing that philosophers never *speak* as if they are aware of the importance of the historical situation *in their time* to the philosophy they develop. This is a mistake, he thinks.
 - B. Dewey is working in the American pragmatist tradition associated most often with William James and himself. This philosophical tradition is concerned to focus on *what works*, and less on *what is true*. In fact, these philosophers tend to think that one cannot know what is true unless one is fully conscious of what problem one's theories and claims about the world are meant to *solve*.
 - C. As a pragmatic, Dewey looks to see what difference a given theory might make in *actual social life* and notices that each seems designed to serve one social end, at the expense of others: they all tend to serve as a bulwark to the *status quo* in society. He worries about the use to which political philosophies can be put by unscrupulous politicians (see pg. 467 bottom)

- c. Why do all these theories of the state seem to serve to bolster the *status quo*, offering a kind of apologetics for existing social arrangements (whatever they are)? It is something about the *logic* of the notions being analyzed.

1. By focusing on, for example, the State, a general concept under which all states must fall, they tend to disguise the significance of the particular properties of *this State*, whatever they might be, and lend to whatever state is being considered the glamor and prestige that attaches the general notion (the same for the concept of the *individual*, or of the *organic relationship between state and individual*).

Upshot: commitment to universalist, abstract theories employing the most general notions makes "men careless in observation of the concrete" in the social world.[465]

Dewey's counterclaim: Solving social problems by analysing concepts independently of concrete experience only establishes the relations among ideas we already have and things we already understand, and discourages us from looking into the nature of the concrete world in which social problems arise and to experiment with different philosophical accounts of their nature in hopes of solving *actual problems* existing therein (e.g., slavery).

Underlying principle: something more like the scientific method is the best way to assess social philosophy and to generate a *useful* theory of *our* social life, not the tools of armchair theorizing.

II. Dewey's Criticism of Individualist Social Philosophies

- a. 18th and 19th century individualist schools (Mill, Bentham, Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Goldman [to an extent]) regard the individual as something *given*, whose interests and needs are the relevant considerations in evaluating the status of social institutions that serve them (since individuals are natural, states and institutions *derived*, artificial entities).

Dewey's critique: This is a mistake because *individuals are created, in part by social institutions*.

Individuals are *social achievements*, not original datums. An individual's properties cannot be evaluated except in terms of the *use*

to which these *achievements* of their social creation can be made, and that is determined by the particular environment in which they exist (the value of a particular property changes depending on the society in which it arises).

When the seat of morality is identified with the interior of individuals, social reform becomes entirely a matter of private business of free individuals. But while this encourages individuals to perfect their moral interiors, "burly sinners run the world." [468] Again, Dewey is concerned about the practical consequences of this or that political philosophy.

- b. Dewey's alternative: let us study how this or that social arrangement effects the kinds of individuals produced, and form our plans for the future with the experimental principles that express what we discover (all tied to specific phenomena of our own society), given what we decide we want to create in society.
Shares something with utilitarianism: the mandate to continually scrutinize every form of organization.

"Society is one word, but infinitely many things." [470]

III. Dewey Against the Elevation of the Nation State

- a. Dewey denies that the State, as a mode of social organization, is superior to, more valuable than, and essentially *trumps* all other forms of social organization. To the contrary, he thinks it may be usefully thought of, depending on a society's purposes and problems, as merely an instrument for the creation of conditions in which other forms of social organization may flourish (cf. de Tocqueville's fascination with America's panoply of voluntary organizations of all kinds).
- b. Dewey's definition of society: "association: coming together in joint intercourse and action for the better realization of any form of experience which is augmented and confirmed by being shared." [473]

"Hence there are as many associations as there are goods which are enhanced by being mutually communicated and participated in." [473]

"Society is the *process* of associating in such ways that experiences, ideas, emotions, values are transmitted and made common."

Dewey is another response to the consequences, many of them bad, of the scientific/technical/industrial revolution. His call for "reconstruction in philosophy" is a call to rekindle the relationship between heart, imagination, the human spirit, and our growing scientific and technical comprehension of and power over the world. As he says "When philosophy shall have co-operated with the course of events and made clear and coherent the meaning of the daily detail, science and emotion will interpenetrate, practice and imagination will embrace. poetry and religious feeling will be the unforced flowers of life." [477]