Lecture Supplement on Dewey's "Democracy and Human Nature" [1939][1]

A brief discussion of an event in Dewey's life between 1919 and 1921 will help us see his conception of an argument for democracy more clearly. During this period Dewey and his wife Alice traveled to Japan and China. As Robert Westbrook notes, in Japan

> Dewey was clearly aware he was in hostile territory….he was deeply troubled by a society that was the antithesis of nearly everything he believed to be just. Japanese society was marked by deep class divisions, held together by the mythology of the [E]mperor cult and the repression of a military state. The free expression of opinion and the scientific analysis of social problems which were at the heart of Deweyan democracy were impossible under these conditions.[2]

Indeed, as Westbrook notes in a footnote,

> the Japanese translation of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* was published as *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* because the word "democracy" was outlawed. The translator, Riichiro Hoashi, was later sentenced to prison for publishing articles on democracy, and his book on ethics was banned because it made no mention of the Imperial household.[3]

On the other hand, their experience in China was nearly a polar opposite. When they learned of his visit to Japan, several former students arranged for him to teach at the National University in Peking for a year and to lecture throughout the country. The Versailles Peace Conference that concluded World War I had resulted in granting territorial concessions in China to Japan in change for a set of loans, and Dewey arrived as a nation-wide student protest movement emerged:

> in the protest that followed…student nationalists demanded a purge of the government and an end to Japanese domination of China. They formed an alliance with Chinese merchants and shopkeepers, and throughout Dewey's stay...the country was rocked by mass demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts of Japanese goods. The student movement made a great impression on Dewey.[4]

Dewey's lectures were published in activist periodicals and were accompanied by many articles explaining his democratic views. He lectured to large audiences and extended his commitment for another year. As Westbrook notes,

> the theory of social conflict and the state which Dewey proposed in his Chinese lectures reflected his **sympathy for pluralism** and the **pluralist critique of state sovereignty** which had been an important current in British political philosophy since World War I and was popularized in the United States by Harold Laski. Dewey argued that most social philosophers had obscured the basis of social conflict by resorting to "generalized antinomies" such as the individual versus society, the people versus the government, or freedom versus authority to explain conflict when its origins lay rather in the **antagonistic relationships of groups**. A group was a "collection of people who are united by common interests." Society was made up of a multiplicity of groups, and the social conflict was at bottom "conflict between classes, occupational groups, or groups constituted along ideational, and perhaps even ethnic lines.
> Conflict arose in society, Dewey said, because of the inequalities in the relationships between the groups that comprised it. "Social conflict occurs not because the interests of the individual are incompatible with those of his society, but because the interests of some groups are gained at the disadvantage of, or even by the suppression of, the interests of other groups." This conflict between groups was the source of social instability and injustice, and it set the task of instrumental social theory.[5]

Dewey held that such social theory should adjudicate such conflicts and evaluate habits, customs, and social institutions according to the degree they contributed to

> **"…the development and qualitative enhancement of *associated living***….[and a social practice] was to be judged good when it contributes positively to the free intercourse, to unhampered exchange of ideas, to mutual respect and friendship and love—in short, to those modes of behaving which make life richer and more worth living for everybody concerned; and conversely, any custom or institution which impedes progress toward these goals is to be judged bad."[6]

According to Westbrook

> the chief obstacle of associated living…were systems of class and caste which isolated different segments of society from one another and established exploitative relationships been social groups. At the opposite pole of the ideal of associated living stood the master-slave relationship.[7]

Whereas the master-slave relationship subjugates persons, the concept of **associated living** is "…but another name for **"moral democracy," a society in which the good of each was a good of all and the good of all the good of each**."[8]

In his *Freedom and Culture* [1939], Dewey develops these ideas. Our editors include three selections from the work: "Science and Free Culture" (pp. 48-58), "Culture and Human Nature" (pp. 210-218), and our current selection "Democracy and Human Nature." In the "Culture and Human Nature," as is so often the case, Dewey offers a historical survey of the English "liberal tradition's views regarding human nature before making what is, surely, an expected remark about understanding "human nature" in this new scientific age:

> 215-216 after many centuries of struggle and following of false gods, the natural sciences now possess methods by which particular facts and general ideas are brought into effective cooperation with one another. But with respect to means for understanding social events, we are still living in the pre-scientific epoch, although the events to be understood are the consequences of application of scientific knowledge to a degree unprecedented in history. With respect to information and understanding of social events, our state is that [we stand on] on one side of an immense number of undigested and unrelated facts, reported in isolation (and hence easily colored by some twist of interest) and large untested generalizations on the other side.[9]

I did not assign either of these two essays, and as you have seen, in "Democracy and Human Nature" **he contends that we need a clearer *science* of "human nature"** [225-226]; but, as is to be expected, he will also argue against the assumption that there is an unchangeable and fixed "human nature." After discussing the views of **Hobbes**, and **Mill**, Dewey says:

> [223] the object of alluding to these two very different conceptions of this component in human nature [Hobbes' "rational egoism" and Mill's utilitarianism] is not to decide or discuss which is right. The point is that both are guilty of the same fallacy. In itself, the impulse (or whatever name be given it) is neither socially maleficent nor beneficent. Its significance depends upon consequences actually produced; and these depend upon the conditions under which it operates and with which it interacts. The conditions are set by tradition, by custom, by law, by the kind of public approvals and disapprovals; by all conditions constituting the environment. These conditions are so pluralized even in one and the same country at the same period that love of gain (regarded as a trait of human nature) may be both socially useful and socially harmful. Neither competition nor cooperation can be judged as traits of human nature. They are names for certain relations among the actions of individuals as the relations actually obtain in a community.
>
> This would be true even if there were tendencies in human nature so definitely marked off from one another as to merit the names given and even if human nature were as fixed as it is sometimes said to be. For even in that case, human nature operates in a multitude of different environing conditions, and it is interaction with the latter that determines the consequences and the social significance and value, positive or negative of the tendencies. The alleged fixity of the structure of human nature does not explain in the least the differences that mark off one tribe, family, people, from another—which is to say that in and of itself it explains no state of society whatever. It issues no advice as to what policies it is advantageous to follow. It does not even justify conservatism as against radicalism.

In short Dewey identifies a core mistake which he thinks misleads many social philosophers—Plato, Hobbes, and Mill are examples—the tendency to read what are actually *particular social phenomena* into *general human nature*. Actually there are two criticisms advanced: first the one just noted which comes out of his Darwinistic naturalism: that our social theory must consider that human beings act within a culture which is within nature, and both of these "containments" are important in assessing our social (or "associated") living. Secondly, he advances the view that there is a tendency for the theorists he discusses to read *specific cultural forms of social interaction into human nature* and then conclude that these are *universal, unalterable, traits* which must be accounted for by all social associations. Here his critique is like one later (and more carefully developed by C.B. Macpherson in his *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*.[10] These discussions will lead Dewey in the third selection to say that:

> [221-222] …any movement purporting to discover the psychological causes and sources of social phenomena is in fact a reverse movement, in which currently social tendencies are read back into the structure of human nature; and are then used to explain the very things from which they are deduced. It was then "natural" for men who reflected the new movement of industry and commerce to erect the appetites, treated by Plato as a kind of necessary evil, into the cornerstone of well-being and progress. Something of the same kind exists at present when love of power is put forward to play the role taken a century ago by self-interest as the dominant "motive"—and if I put the word motive in quotation

marks, it is for the reason just given. What are called motives turn out upon critical examination be to complex attitudes patterned under cultural conditions, rather than simple elements in human nature.

Even when we refer to tendencies and impulses that actually are genuine elements in human nature we find, unless we swallow whole some current opinion, that of themselves they explain nothing about social phenomena. For they produce consequences only as they are shaped into acquired dispositions by interaction with environing cultural conditions.

Rejecting the idea of an unchangeable human nature will allow social sciences to make the transition made in the natural sciences when they adopted the methodology of seeking regularities which are born out in future experience. As our editors note in their introduction, Dewey's

> [xiv-xv] …faith in the capacity of scientific method to improve and inspire our investigations in other areas often seems limitless: even human values, long considered "subjective" and thereby immune to disinterested inquiry, are fair game. Because values have their cause as well as consequence in human behavior, they too are "capable of rectification and development by use of the resources provided by knowledge of physical relations." There are no unchanging values, or "ends-in-themselves" whose nature only philosophy can penetrate. On the contrary, science has taught us that "valuations are constant phenomena of human behavior, "pivots" for redirecting our conduct.[11]

They go on to cite the following passage from our essay:

> [225-226] because of lack of an adequate theory of human nature in its relations to democracy, attachment to democratic ends and methods has tended to become a matter of tradition and habit—an excellent thing as far as it goes, but when it becomes routine [it] is easily undermined when change of conditions changes other habits.
>
> Were I to say that democracy needs a new psychology of human nature, one adequate to the heavy demands put upon it by foreign and domestic conditions, I might be taken to utter an academic irrelevancy. But if the remark is understood to mean that **democracy has always been allied with humanism, with faith in the potentialities of human nature**, and that the present need is vigorous reassertion of this faith, developed in relevant ideas and manifested in practical attitudes, it but continues the American tradition. For belief in the "common man" has no significance save as an expression of belief in the intimate and vital connection of democracy and human nature.
>
> We cannot continue the idea of human nature when left to itself, when freed from external arbitrary restrictions, will tend to the production of democratic institutions that work successfully. We have not to state the issue from the other side. We have to see that **democracy means the belief that humanistic culture *should* prevai**l; we should be frank and open in our recognition that **the proposition is a *moral* one**—like any idea that concerns what *should* be.

Here, and in the ensuing paragraph where Dewey discusses how we need an argument which (in 1939) will work against both Fascist and Marxist challenges to democracy, we can see more clearly what Dewey means when he says he wants to offer a "**moral argument**" for democracy! To claim it is **valuable** is to advance it as a particular sort of value proposition, and while for him values emerge out of facts, **values are not simply "desires," "goods," or "ends-in-view." They are such things which have been subjected to critical examination including assessment of circumstances and consequences**.

For him democracy demands

> [229] …that conditions be such as will enable the potentialities of human nature to reach fruition….It is the road which places the greatest burden of responsibility upon the greatest number of human beings….Just because the cause of democratic freedom is the cause of the fullest possible realization of human potentialities, the latter when they are suppressed and oppressed will in time rebel and demand the opportunity for manifestation….self-governing institutions are the means by which human nature can secure its fullest realization in the greatest number of persons….We have advanced far enough to say that democracy is a way of life. We have yet to realize that it is a way of personal life and one which provides a moral standard for personal conduct.

Return to Course Webpage

Go to Midcoast Senior College Webpage

Go to My Webpage

I greatly appreciate comments and corrections--typos and infelicities are all too common and the curse of "auto-correct" plagues me!

Email me comments on this

File revised on 09/27/25

[1] John Dewey, "Democracy and Human Nature," was first published in his *Freedom and Culture* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), pp. 104-114, 123-130. It is reprinted *The Later Works*, v. 13. The selection we are discussing appears in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 219-229. The page references here refer to this reprint and emphasis has sometimes been added to the passages.

[2] Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1991), p. 241.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 242, footnote.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 242-243.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 245. Westbrook cites Dewey's *Lectures from China and Japan, 1919-1920,* ed. Robert Clopton and Tsuin-chen Ou (Honolulu, Univ. Press of Hawaii, 1973), p. 73. Emphasis added to the passage.

[6] Dewey's *Lectures from China and Japan, 1919-1920,* op. cit., p. 90, cited by Westbrook on p. 247. Emphasis added to the passage.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 247.

[8] *Ibid*., pp. 248-249. Emphasis [bold] added to the passage.

[9] John Dewey, "Culture and Human Nature," was first published in his *Freedom and Culture* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), pp. 24-28, 36-42, and 42-46. It is reprinted *The Later Works*, v. 13. The selection we are discussing appears in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 210-218. The page references here refer to this reprint and emphasis has sometimes been added to the passages.

[10] C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford UP., 1962).

[11] "Editors' Introduction" to *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. ix-xix, p. xv.