

## Lecture Supplement on Dewey's "Intelligence and Morals" [1908]<sup>[1]</sup>

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In contrast to his "The Ethics of Democracy" [1888] which is rooted in his Hegelian Idealism, this essay written twenty years later is rooted in Dewey's pragmatic theory. He wants to free us from a philosophical propensity to focus attention in moral thought upon the transcendent, absolute, and *a priori* and, instead focus attention on human practices in the natural and social environments.

In her "Dewey's Moral Philosophy," Elizabeth Anderson maintains that:

Dewey's ethics replaces the goal of identifying an **ultimate end** or **supreme principle** that can serve as a criterion of ethical evaluation with the goal of identifying **a method for improving our value judgments**. Dewey argued that ethical inquiry is of a piece with empirical inquiry more generally. It is the use of reflective intelligence to revise one's judgments in light of the consequences of acting on them. Value judgments are tools for enabling the satisfactory redirection of conduct when habit no longer suffices to direct it. As tools, they can be evaluated instrumentally, in terms of their success in guiding conduct. We test our value judgments by putting them into practice and seeing whether the results are satisfactory—whether they solve the problems they were designed to solve, whether we find their consequences acceptable, whether they enable successful responses to novel problems, whether living in accordance with alternative value judgments yields more satisfactory results. We achieve moral progress and maturity to the extent that we adopt habits of reflectively revising our value judgments in response to the widest consequences for everyone of living them out. This pragmatic approach requires that we locate the conditions of warrant for our value judgments in human conduct itself, not in any *a priori* fixed reference point outside of conduct, such as in God's commands, Platonic Forms, pure reason, or "nature," considered as giving humans a fixed *telos*. To do so requires that we understand different types of value judgments in functional terms, as forms of conduct that play distinctive roles in the life of reflective, social beings. Dewey thereby offers a naturalistic metaethic of value judgments, grounded in developmental and social psychology.<sup>[2]</sup>

He believed that **the new social conditions arising in in the United States, and throughout the world, required a new form of social theory.**

We begin the selection with a cursory discussion of Greek, Feudal, and Renaissance philosophical thought patterns and the development of a "democratic polity, commercial expansion, and scientific reorganization." Dewey sees the development here as a "liberation" or "emancipation," but believes we need a [philosophical] theory for our new practices. According to him:

67 theory may therefore become responsible to the practices that have generated it; the good [should] be connected with nature, but with nature naturally, not metaphysically, conceived, and social life [should] be cherished in behalf of its own immediate possibilities, not on the ground of its remote connections with cosmic reason and absolute end.

He points out that while many believe that Greek thought surrendered the individual to the state, it is more true to say that

[67] none has ever known better than the Greek that the individual comes to himself and to his own only in association with others. But Greek thought subjected...both state and individual to an external cosmic order; and thereby it inevitably restricted the free use in doubt, inquiry and experimentation of human intelligence.

I believe it is important to emphasize here that he concurs with the Greek emphasis on our social nature (that "individuals come into themselves only in association with others"). His "biological view does not conceive of us as "atomic individuals" (separable from others), but as social creatures who can only live a "good life" in the company of others--but more will be made of this further later. The passage emphasizes, instead, that **as attention shifted from the fixed and static to the natural, science could develop**. Because it began to take motion and change as natural and worthy of study, industry has become truly useful:

68-69 the industrial life had been condemned by Greek exaltation of abstract thought and by Greek contempt for labor as representing the brute struggle of carnal appetite for its own satiety. The industrial movement, offspring of science, restored it to its central position in morals. When Adam Smith made economic activity the moving spring of man's unremitting effort...to better his own lot, he recorded this change. And when he made sympathy the central spring in man's conscious moral endeavor, he reported the effect which the increasing intercourse of men, due primarily to commerce, had in breaking down suspicion and jealousy and in liberating man's kinder impulses.

This transformation from attending to the fixed, unchanging, and final, to attending to the changing, industrial, and social lays **a foundation for democracy**:

[69] democracy is an absurdity where faith in the individual as individual is impossible; and this faith is impossible where intelligence is regarded as a cosmic power, not an adjustment and application of individual tendencies. It is also impossible when appetite and desires are conceived to be the dominant /factor in the constitution of most men's character, and when appetite and desire are conceived to be the manifestations of the disorderly and unruly principle of nature.

Against Plato, then, Dewey would refocus our attention on the changing world and the application of human intelligence to the dynamic social lives of human beings. But he does not believe the progress we have made over the period has been smooth and orderly. On pp. 69-73 he discusses utilitarianism and French thinkers who endeavored to create social systems which would "force" individuals to pursue the welfare of others, and German idealists and transcendentalists who looked for "natural laws" which would govern social and moral affairs. As he sees it these thinkers effectively continued the classical search for a single, final good which would provide a moral force that could govern and perfect human beings. Dewey thinks that this sort of theory continues the mistakes of the ancient thinkers:

[73] the transformation in attitude, to which I referred, is the growing belief that the proper business of intelligence is discrimination of multiple and present goods and of the varied immediate means of their realization; not search for one remote aim. The progress of biology has accustomed our minds to the notion that intelligence is not an outside power presiding supremely but statically over the desires and efforts of man, but is a method of adjustment of capacities and conditions within specific situations.

Instead of trying to provide a fixed body of moral rules and a single final end, ethics should

[73-74] ...utilize physiology, anthropology and psychology to discover all that can be discovered of man, his organic powers and propensities....its business is not to search for the one separate moral motive, it is to converge all the instrumentalities of the social arts, of law, education, economics and political science upon the construction of intelligent methods of improving the common lot.

Dewey believes that the transformation he is recommending doesn't lessen the role for reason (or, better, intelligence). To see how this can be the case, however, we need to understand that Dewey rejects the conception of nature as something which is unchangeable, fixed, and deductively rational. In place of this view he substitutes a view which sees natural laws as

[74-75] ...convenient formulations of selected portions of change followed through a longer or shorter period of time, and then registered in statistical forms that are amenable to mathematical manipulation....Knowledge of nature does not mean subjection to predestination, but insight into courses of change; and insight which is formulated in "laws." That is methods of subsequent procedure.

Knowledge of the processes and conditions of physical and social change through experimental science and genetic history has one result with a double name: increase of control and increase of responsibility; increase of power to direct natural change, and increase of responsibility for its equitable direction toward fuller good.

[76] Dewey ends by contending that the motive [or sanction] for morality is that humans seek "...the consent of their kind." We will see that the importance of our social nature is, here, a key to his moral theory and its defense of democracy.

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

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File revised on 09/27/25

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[1] John Dewey, "Intelligence and Morals," first published in his *Ethics* (NY: Columbia U.P., 1908). It is revised and reprinted *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* [1910], and appears *The Middle Works*, v. 4. The selection we are discussing appears in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 66-77. The page references here refer to this reprint and emphasis has sometimes been added to the passages.

[2] Elizabeth Anderson, "Dewey's Moral Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-moral/>, accessed 04/21/17.