

Lecture Supplement on Dewey's "Philosophy and Democracy" [1918]^[1]

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Dewey contends that the sort of philosophical wisdom sought through the ages is a sort of *moral knowledge* and refers [39] not to the constitution of things already in existence....[rather it] refers to a condition about something to be done, a preference for living this sort of life rather than that. It refers not to an accomplished reality but to a desired future which our desires, when translated into articulate conviction, may help to bring into existence." He believes it is good to read the philosophers of the past because they reveal other's considered conceptions of the worth-while life:

[41] ...what makes philosophy hard work and also makes its cultivation worthwhile, is...the fact that it assumes the responsibility for setting forth some ideal of a collective good life by the methods which the best science of its day employs in its quite different task, and with the characteristic knowledge of its day.

[41-42] He contends that philosophy has been, and is, lead astray when it pretends to a greater sort of knowledge, but that **this can be avoided where it is intentionally connected with action**. He also claims [42] that the development of "modern democracy" has coincided with the development of "modern experimental science," and he wonders whether this is happenstance or "natural." His answer, here, begins as he notes that:

[43] **all deliberate action of mind is in a way an experiment with the world to see what it will stand for, what it will promote and what frustrate**. The world is tolerant and fairly hospitable. It permits and even encourages all sorts of experiments. But in the long run some are more welcomed and assimilated than others. Hence there can be no difference save one of depth and scope between the questions of the relations of the world to a scheme of conduct in the form of church government or in a form of art and that of its relation to democracy. If there is to be a difference, it is only because democracy is a form of desire and endeavor which reaches further and condenses into itself more issues.

As Dewey sees it, democracy involves liberty, equality, and fraternity. His remarks here are incomplete, but looking at them at this point will, I hope, make the social character of his thought clearer as we pick up the next set of Dewey readings.

[44] One sense of **liberty** involves freedom of action in accord with fixed, or natural, laws; but Dewey contends that such a conception encourages "absolutistic," rather than "democratic" thought:

a philosophy animated...by the strivings of men to achieve democracy will construe liberty as meaning a universe in which there is real uncertainty and contingency, a world which is not all in, and never will be, a world which in some respect is incomplete and **in the making**, and which in these respects may be made this way or that **according as men judge, prize, love and labor**. To such a philosophy any option of a perfect or complete reality, finished, exiting always the same without regard to the vicissitudes of time, will be abhorrent. It will think of time not as that part of reality which for some strange reason has not yet been traversed, but as a genuine field of novelty, of real and unpredictable increments to existence, a field for experimentation and invention.

For Dewey talk of **equality** requires that we give up on past philosophical commitments to a "feudal" (or "Platonic") conception wherein values could be placed in a linear matrix of degrees of value or worth. Whether the hierarchical system arises out of custom, "universal reason," or some other source, the search is for an [45] indefeasible seat of authority (or for the displacement of one such by another):

45-46 prevailing philosophies have unconsciously discountenanced [democracy]. They have failed to furnish it with articulation, with reasonableness, for they have at bottom been committed to the principle of a single, final and unalterable authority from which all lesser authorities are derived. The men who questioned the divine right of kings did so in the name of another absolute. The voice of the people was mythologized into the voice of God. Now a halo may be preserved about the monarch. Because of his distance, he can be rendered transcendently without easy detection. But the people are too close at hand, too obviously empirical, to be lent to deification. Hence **democracy as ranked for the most part as an intellectual anomaly, lacking philosophical basis and logical coherency, but upon the whole to be accepted because somehow or other it works better than other schemes** and seems to develop a more kindly and humane set of social institutions....[and] when it has tried to achieve a philosophy it has clothed itself in an atomistic individualism, as full of defects and inconsistencies in theory as it was charged with obnoxious consequences when an attempt was made to act upon it.

46 Now whatever the idea of equality means for democracy, it means, I take it, that the world is not to be construed as a fixed order of species, grades, or degrees. It means that every existence deserving the name of existence has something unique and irreplaceable about it, that it does not exist to illustrate a principle, to realize a universal or to embody a kind

or class. As philosophy it denies the basic principle of atomistic individualism as truly as that of rigid feudalism. For the individualism traditionally associated with democracy makes equality quantitative, and hence individuality something external and mechanical rather than qualitative and unique.

Finally, he holds that **fraternity** is important for democracy, but not a fraternity of atomic individuals. Instead, he conceives democracy as concerned with

[46-47] ...with *associated individuals* which each by intercourse with others somehow makes the life of each more distinctive.

(end)

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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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^[1] John Dewey, “Philosophy and Democracy,” was first delivered in an address to the Philosophical Union of The University of California on 11/29/1918, and then published in *Chronicle* v. 21 (University of California, 1919). It reprinted *The Middle Works*, v. 11. The selection we are discussing appears in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 38-47. The page references here refer to this reprint and emphasis has sometimes been added to the passages.