

A Case for Dewey's Moral Theory

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In the essay "John Dewey's Pragmatism and Moral Education," Shulamit Gribov explores the central elements of Dewey's theory of moral development and raises a number of concerns about the consistency of Dewey's philosophical position. This leads her to question the usefulness of Dewey's pragmatic approach to moral theory, especially to educators. Dewey's theory of moral development grows out of a fundamental pragmatic idea that thought is a product of the interaction between organism and environment. These interactions produce cognitive products, and lead to principles that evolve as the formulation of certain habits. Habits can subsequently change over time. It is our habit to organize and use these experiences in our activities of life. The development of a person's character is a result of the interpenetration of a wide range of habits. Virtuous traits interpenetrate one another; and this unity is involved in the very idea of integrity of character. For Dewey, intelligent activity is characterized by what he perceives are "intrinsically moral qualities" including open-mindedness, breadth of outlook, and assumption of responsibility for developing consequences of ideas that are accepted. We argue that these moral qualities noted by Gribov in her essay represent a *significant* moral theory, but we also recognize that their simplicity and general character may make them difficult to appreciate.

We first respond to several points regarding Gribov's critique of Dewey's general framework for understanding habits, value, and inquiry. Gribov's essay raises some paradoxes with respect to Dewey's thinking on "inquiry," "habit," and "value." We say paradoxes, because we think Dewey responds to these in his writings, and as such, satisfies several of Gribov's concerns. In what follows, we note only two of these paradoxes, and what we think Dewey's solution to them might be. Gribov argues that "To Dewey, knowledge was essentially scientific inquiry." Following this line of thought through, Gribov makes the claim that this "fallibilistic" and "pragmatic" approach to value-formation is "unclear" in its claim to provide "a clue as to what counts as human interests." Specifically, Gribov thinks a general framework is needed.

Does Dewey have a general framework? We can only hint at this here, but we believe that Dewey's answer is found in Gribov's correct assumption that Dewey based the possibility of success of inquiry on the satisfaction of the needs of those engaged in deliberate value-formation. Recall that impulses (affective-motor responses) and interests (the transaction between individuals and their environments) reflect for Dewey uncritical modes of response.¹ They are uncritical precisely because they are unreflective. All human beings have impulses/interests. This is biological/behavioral fact for Dewey. As such, Dewey does have a cogent notion of what "counts" as human interest. But human interest, to be valued, must be connected up with and transformed into intelligent human desire, that is, the intelligent valuation of a specific object/event. Only in this manner can interest as

such be considered as a value. What determines whether interests will be taken up as such, or discarded in favor of others, is their tendency to align with other desires; other human needs that are judged by inquiry to be themselves interests worthy of valuation.² As such, human interests are context-specific. Since Dewey maintains that we are always working out of some "context," some set of routines, habits, problems, consequences both foreseen and unseen, interrelationships among consequences, we take our cue from where we are as much as where we would like to be. Dewey does have a "framework" to situate interests, although we suspect what Gribov is looking for is something far less "flexible" than what Dewey provides.

Second, Gribov takes note of the fact that Dewey nowhere makes clear the relationship between habits and knowledge. This poses problems for Gribov, because without a clear delineation of the relationship, there does not seem to be "any instrument to allow for the interconnection of habits." This leads Gribov to question how "knowledge" is to solve "the problem presented in a new experience." Gribov is surely correct inasmuch as she argues that knowledge does contain many different habits. Many of these habits are those that have "worked" in solving situations in the past. These old habits get tried out in novel situations and are judged on the basis of their success in solving new dilemmas. And inasmuch as inquiry, too, is a habit, it also comes under scrutiny when it fails to provide a solution to settle a "felt problem." But this is precisely what counts as a solution to Gribov's contention with respect to Dewey. Because inquiry is itself a habit that changes in response to the problems it faces, it can remain valuable with respect to arranging habits, and sorting useful ones from nonuseful ones. Habits are useful inasmuch as they solve "our" problems. When they stop doing this, they are to be reevaluated. Inquiry is the tool that reevaluates them, based in part upon the needs of those who are engaged in the problem, in conjunction with the consequences that they portend. Inquiry thus puts habits in relation to each other, sorts habits, accords value to them, applauds them or reconstructs them in light of the consequences, both seen and foreseen, that habits manage and/or create.³ Similarly, inquiry, too, comes under reconstruction when it no longer provides a way to frame new solutions to felt problems (witness Dewey's outlining of the downfall of the "Aristotelian method," and the rise of the "new science" in the seventeenth century, as inaugurated by Francis Bacon).⁴ The point being that there *is* a relationship here and inquiry provides the possibility for such a relationship and for habits to be reconstructed or valued, depending upon their ability to meet human needs.

Next, we examine Gribov's more general dissatisfaction with Dewey's lack of moral goals. Gribov questions the value of a theory of moral development that emerges from a philosophical position that centers on experience, or more specifically as a product of interactions, rather than from a set of "universal" moral principles. Gribov faults Dewey for connecting organism and environment, but then being unwilling to make the next move, to specify moral values and norms that prevail in a given society as the particular code of moral values that should be presented to students in schools as part of their moral education. One of Gribov's main concerns is that Dewey fails to articulate distinct goals toward which one can aspire. Gribov claims that the continuously readjusting character does not influence

society, but is influenced by it. Thus, there is no mechanism for improving moral principles; rather we are somehow trapped by already existing social forces and our own well ingrained habits. For Gribov, Dewey fails to distinguish between the moral and the social. She concludes that Dewey's abstinence from a determination of educational and moral goals, together with his conceptual ambiguity about the nature of habits and actions, leave his contribution to a theory of moral education wanting.

Clearly, pragmatic views about moral development may be unsatisfying to those seeking universal principles. These critics question Dewey's idea that social science serves as an instrument of moral guidance and social planning. How might Dewey defend himself? The work of Steven Rockefeller seems to be helpful in addressing this general concern. Rockefeller examines the moral side of Dewey's thinking in his book *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*.⁵ According to Rockefeller, Dewey would respond to that critique by saying that "significant social progress is being made, the experiment has just begun, and there is no more promising alternative."⁶ The central moral goals of democratic humanism are to avoid absolutism as well as subjective relativism. Thus, Dewey rejects any authoritarian approach or particularistic approach to morals, whether it be in educational settings or within religious traditions.

Since Dewey rejects the idea of universal principles, can we find in Dewey moral goals to which we can aspire? Dewey is consistent throughout his writings about his commitment to democratic humanism, which includes a humanistic, naturalistic, experimental approach to moral development. Rockefeller argues that Dewey articulates a broad moral vision, one which includes compassion, peace, cooperatively building a harmonious world of equal opportunity, freedom, and, justice. These goals are at the center of Dewey's moral challenge, and represent the goals to which society should aspire.⁷ For Dewey, faith in democracy is a moral ideal. Rockefeller concludes that Dewey: "conceived of the democratic way of life, in all its everyday concreteness, as a method of intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth in which thought and action, the spiritual and the material, the individual and society, person and work, art and everyday life, the religious and the secular are fully integrated."⁸ At the heart of Dewey's pragmatism is experience, and it is direct experience of the values inherent in actual situations that awakens the human vision of the ideal rather than knowledge about the interrelations and causal connections between things.⁹ Moral judgment, then, is not a product of the philosopher, but rather a process of moral valuation by the community. We acknowledge the difficulty of this process, but what is the alternative?

1. John Dewey, "Theory of Valuation," in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 221.

2. *Ibid.*, 218.

3. John Dewey, "Human Nature and Conduct," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 124, 126, 133, 137.

4. John Dewey, "Reconstruction in Philosophy," *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 94-98.

5. Steven Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
6. Ibid., 546.
7. Ibid., 547.
8. Ibid., 549.
9. Ibid., 550.