

The Structure of Dewey's Scientific Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

As most of us know, Dewey's writings present multiple challenges. First, the volume of his works makes comprehensive coverage prior to analysis nearly impossible. Second, one must understand Dewey's pragmatism before the import of his words can become clear.¹ Finally, if one does not take a broad range of his work into consideration, or misses connections between Dewey's pragmatism and a particular claim or set of claims he makes, one risks mistaking Dewey's views for something else. In this essay I am concerned to head off several such misunderstandings of Dewey's ethics, and draw out some of the educational implications of Dewey's scientific conception of ethics.

In a recent essay, "Dewey's Ethics: Philosophy or Science?" Christine McCarthy claims that Dewey's ethics ought to be established in public schools, since it gives students both "moral knowledge" and "the cognitive tools that would further their own searches for moral knowledge."² While I agree with much of what she says, I believe that there is a danger of misinterpreting Dewey given her presentation of his views. First, McCarthy's picture of the source of moral principles threatens to turn Dewey into a consequentialist. Second, she leaves out of her account the role that experience plays in his theory, and the role that inquiry plays (should play) in our lives. Third, McCarthy's account of moral propositions, valuings, and valuations is misleadingly oversimplified, and the examples she gives do not match Dewey's criteria for empirical judgments. Fourth, McCarthy's discussion of the status of post-inquiry moral judgments in Dewey's thought also does not take into account the nature of inquiry and general principles in his writings, and without seeing this latter side of his work, Dewey could be interpreted as subsuming ethics under a conception of science he did not in fact support.³ Once I have reinterpreted these aspects of Dewey's ethics, I argue that in fact it is an appropriate ethical framework for K-12 curriculum, but for more controversial reasons than McCarthy admits.

THE DATA OF DEWEY'S ETHICS

McCarthy claims, and I agree, that the foundation of Dewey's science of ethics is its data. Previously acquired data include moral codes, legal codes, the social sciences, and theoretical principles discerned by earlier thinkers.⁴ However, McCarthy's reconstruction of what Dewey took such data to look like can easily be misinterpreted. McCarthy claims that the data ethical researchers are looking for are "the consequences of adopting this or that mode of conduct" (*DE*, 341).⁵ Examining these consequences can reveal patterns, which can be generalized into principles of moral action. These principles can subsequently be used to guide our actions to success. Additionally, they can be used to determine which goals *should* be pursued. In this way "we gradually identify a body of moral knowledge having the objectivity characteristic of every body of scientific knowledge" (*DE*, 341). However, there are at least two ways one can understand Dewey's meaning here, and I wish to undermine one of them.

Left by itself, the claim that it is the “consequences of adopting this or that mode of conduct” that are the ground of our moral principles can be taken in more than one way. The most obvious reading is a consequentialist one, where Dewey is claiming that the consequences of our actions determines their worth. I protest this interpretation for several reasons. First, Dewey in his essay “Three Independent Factors in Morals,” argues that ends, duty, and character are all *independent* factors in moral action.⁶ That is to say, each has its own source and hence cannot be reduced to the other.⁷ Traditional models, such as those from Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and others attempted to locate the source of moral goodness in a single foundational value and derive the others from that source. However Dewey rejected this idea, arguing for a pluralistic moral ontology, so to speak. Hence, the consequences of our actions are only one of several considerations relevant to determining the worth of an action.

The second reason we should not read Dewey as a consequentialist is his claim that the consequentialists’ position is self-defeating.⁸ First, he argued that the theory defeats itself by claiming both that pleasure is the end and that calculation is the method by which we ought to estimate the potential pleasures associated with an act. Dewey argued that the pleasure associated with any activity is so contingent upon the interactions of the agent and the environment as to make such calculations impossible. If, however, we limit ourselves to those pleasures “which so intrinsically accompany the nature of an act that they may be calculated,” he argued that “we have really set up the man’s existing character as the criterion” and not the pleasures or pains as was originally intended.⁹ On either horn of the dilemma, consequentialism defeats itself.

The final reason for not reading Dewey as a consequentialist is his rejection of the distinction between character and conduct that is fundamental to the consequentialist framework. Dewey’s argument is roughly this: Conduct and character are functional distinctions only. On the one side we talk about the causal factors in the production of action, and on the other side we speak of the effects, taken as separate from the agent. Kant favored the former as the source of moral worth, while Jeremy Bentham and Mill favored the latter. However, both of these positions are one-sided. As Dewey says, “[a]t whichever end we begin, we find ourselves intellectually compelled to consider the other end.”¹⁰ Character, for Dewey, is one’s attitude and predisposition toward ends *as it is embodied in action*, or as he says, the “interpenetration of habits.”¹¹ Hence, our character is defined by our conduct. Further, our conduct is determined by our character. That is, the meaning of our actions, for example, whether leaving the baby in the bathwater is a neglectful or homicidal act, depends on our intentions. Dewey concluded that both deontological and consequentialist theories are flawed, turning what is merely a functional distinction into a rigid ontological separation, and elevating consideration of one over the other. Whether or not Dewey was right about Bentham or Mill, it is clear that he was attempting to reconstruct the language of morality by rejecting the distinction between character and conduct that is fundamental to consequentialism.

So far, the aspects of Dewey’s views I have explicated are these: First, he held that any one of (at least) three sources of norms — duty/principles, consequences/

ends/the Good, and character — can determine what one ought to do in any given situation. Second, character and conduct are two sides of the same coin — the ongoing transactions between the organism and the environment — and cannot be separated for the purposes of determining what is the right thing to do. These facts leave us with a puzzle: How does a moral agent decide what she ought to do? McCarthy's answer is that the science of Dewey's ethics leads to principles that we can use to guide our choices, and that this is a straightforward matter of scientific inquiry (*DE*, 346, 341). What is missing from McCarthy's depiction of Dewey's view is two-fold. First, we need to consider the function and place of inquiry in human life, both at the individual and the social level. Without knowing where inquiry fits into moral agency and community life, it would be easy to mistake the *function* of inquiry, something Dewey never intended. Second, we need to understand the role experience plays in inquiry in order to grasp fully the nature and function of inquiry itself. Thus, I will briefly explicate Dewey's account of these notions before moving on.

DEWEY'S CONCEPTION OF EXPERIENCE

Dewey called the type of philosophy he was advocating "empirical naturalism," to indicate both a holistic conception of the natural world, and the method by which we come to understand that world. Prior empiricisms had taken for granted a split between self and world wherein the world impresses itself on the passive senses of the individual. On this view, experience is the reception of sense-data from the external world. For Dewey, though, such a conception of experience separated us from the environment in a way that made it impossible to explain much in human life.¹² In brief, Dewey thought that experience is a *transaction* between an organism and its environment; it is both *in* and *of* nature.¹³ That is to say, an experience takes place within nature, not apart from it, and it is partly *constituted* by that environment. Organisms, both human and nonhuman, are constantly interacting with the environment, and hence human life is a sequence of experiences leading from one moment to the next. Furthermore, Dewey argued that we carry experiences over from one moment to the next, most importantly at the level of the development of our habits.¹⁴ In any activity there is an end. In seeking that end, we consider various possible courses of action. We hypothesize that one of them will lead to a satisfactory resolution to our dilemma. Acting on our hypothesis we have what Dewey called a "consummatory experience," or an experience of intention-action-consequences.¹⁵ The *experience* of the intention-action-results sequence tells us whether our hypothesis was correct, and can suggest what might have been done differently. This experience changes us, reinforcing some habits and weakening others, depending on the nature of the experience. And, it gives us both means-ends knowledge as well as knowledge of the satisfactoriness of the means-ends activity in which we have engaged. However, such knowledge claims have a special status in Dewey's thought, so I should say something about the production and status of knowledge.

THE NATURE AND ROLE OF INQUIRY

Dewey argued that because we humans live *in* and *by means of* the environment, inquiry plays an essential role in our lives. What he meant is that since success in any

endeavor depends on a combination of a) the intelligence of the agent, b) what materials are available in the environment, and c) outside factors the agent either could not anticipate or prevent, the environment has a significant degree of control over what we can and cannot do.¹⁶ Furthermore, the environment is a mix of precarious and stable elements, that is, some elements that we can rely on to be predictable, like rocks and trees, and some elements that are (often) unpredictable, such as humans, animals, and the weather.¹⁷ Therefore, inquiry is essential if we are to be able to succeed in our endeavors. But what are the essential elements of inquiry and the "scientific attitude," as Dewey sometimes called it?

Dewey treated the notion of inquiry in a number of places, and I cannot deal with them all, nor attempt to make them all consistent. However, I believe that the basic elements of inquiry are summed up in several propositions. First, inquiry *always* originates in doubt. As he says in both *How We Think* and the *Ethics*, reflective thinking "cannot emerge when there is positive belief as to what is right and what is wrong," for otherwise the result is not reflective but habitual thinking.¹⁸ Second, inquiry thus requires that we "hold belief in suspense...doubt until evidence is obtained...[and] go where evidence points instead of putting first a personally preferred solution."¹⁹ Hence, preconceived ideas must be set aside prior to inquiry. Third, these first two entail that we must "use [previously successful ideas] as hypotheses to be tested instead of as dogmas to be asserted."²⁰ Finally, the aim of inquiry is the solution of a problematic situation or dilemma.²¹ Therefore, any hypothesis considered in the process of deliberating about what to do must make explicit reference to the situation at hand, including both the context (environment) and the ends and capacities of the person deliberating. Such hypotheses will be of the means-ends types, proposing some activity as the path to an end-in-view.²² Successful inquiry, according to Dewey, requires that we have fairly specific attitudes and act in specific ways. What I will argue next is that the types of propositions McCarthy associates with Dewey's notion of inquiry match neither the requirements I have set out in this section, nor the form of valuation judgments Dewey sets out in his other writings.

THE PRODUCTS OF INQUIRY

While it is true that Dewey does say that inquiry is to be our method of generating moral principles, let us examine the way in which inquiry is to function in his system. In the method of inquiry, what is the hypothesis being tested? According to McCarthy, it is claims such as "x is better than y" or "action x ought to be taken" (*DE*, 342).²³ However, these statements are misleading taken by themselves. First, I believe that the structure of moral propositions has not fully been illustrated. Second, the relation between valuing and valuation judgments should be revised according to this account of moral propositions. Finally, given the sketchy outline of moral propositions as hypotheses, one might interpret confirmed hypotheses as objective moral truths, in the sense of timeless, decontextualized verities. McCarthy herself seems to favor this interpretation, for example when she claims that inquiry into the truth of these propositions yields "[g]eneral, universal, moral truths" (*DE*, 346). Once again, consideration of a range of Dewey's texts can mitigate the possibility of misinterpretation of his views.

Taking claims such as “x is better than y” out of context obscures the role that such claims play in moral discourse. To begin with, Dewey rejects any notion of intrinsic values as opposed to instrumental values. He argued that “ends formed in separation from considerations of things as means are foolish to the point of irrationality.”²⁴ Dewey’s claim is that once again theorists have transformed a functional distinction into an ontological one. The danger of this distinction is that it allows us to consider the worth of an end in seeming isolation from its means, something Dewey regarded as dangerously shortsighted. On this view, the question is therefore *not* “is x better than y,” but rather “is x better than y *as a means to end z*.” Inquiry is for the purpose of determining the means of controlling the environment for one’s ends. What we want to know is what means-end combination will yield the most satisfactory consummatory experiences, all things considered. As we saw in the discussion of inquiry, the answer to this question depends significantly on specific features of the environment, the agent, and the action taken. Therefore, the principles that emerge from such inquiry will be highly contextual and relative to the agents’ ends and certainly not universal and absolute generalizations.

My second worry about the interpretation of the products of Deweyan inquiry has to do with McCarthy’s depiction of Dewey’s distinction between valuings and valuation judgments. First, McCarthy brings up Dewey’s claim that the “field of value” is a field of observable facts that he calls “value-facts,” facts that are the natural selections and rejections that human beings engage in, and which he calls “carings-for” (*DE*, 341).²⁵ Caring-for behavior that includes “the element of taking action for the purpose of achieving a foreseen end” is what Dewey calls “valuing” (*DE*, 342).²⁶ According to McCarthy, valuing behavior can be done more or less successfully, since the inquiry that led to that behavior can be done well or poorly. Valuation judgments are, according to McCarthy’s picture of Dewey, judgments about the quality of valuings: “the quality of any valuing depends upon the quality of the inquiry that has been undertaken with respect to the relevant data” (*DE*, 342). That is, how predictive is the connection between action x and end y? Valuation propositions on this view are propositions such as “x is better than y” or “action x ought be taken” (*DE*, 342). However, if we examine Dewey’s discussions of valuings and valuation judgments in both *Theory of Valuation* and *Ethics*, valuation judgments turn out to be something slightly different. We should first notice that both of the examples McCarthy uses violate the condition of the level of detail necessary for a moral proposition. Recall that moral propositions are statements about the conditions requisite for bringing about satisfactory consummations, or transformations of problematic situations into satisfactory ones. That moral propositions are about the conditions for such transformations is a) exactly the reason they are amenable to scientific inquiry, as McCarthy points out, and b) also exactly why inquiry *does not* result in categorical claims such as “x is better than y.” Hence, valuation judgments in Dewey’s account are just like scientific judgments, but in a way different than the one McCarthy suggests. However, to explicate my meaning fully, I will have to turn to McCarthy’s description of Dewey’s account of truth, knowledge, and the nature of scientific claims.

DEWEY'S CONCEPTIONS OF TRUTH, KNOWLEDGE AND SCIENCE

McCarthy claims that "clearly, in Dewey's view, bona fide knowledge with respect to moral matters can be acquired, and it can be acquired by a straightforward process of scientific reasoning" (*DE*, 341). I believe that a serious misinterpretation of Dewey's views is implied by McCarthy's discussion of moral knowledge. She claims that "the purpose of moral theory is to generate moral principles which... emerge eventually [from repeated inquiries] as a *verified* body of moral knowledge" (*DE*, 345, emphasis added). Further, she quotes Dewey as claiming that inquiry is the search for "a reasonable principle by which to decide where the right really lies" (*DE*, 345).²⁷ Knowledge is, according to McCarthy, of "[g]eneral, universal, moral truths [that are] sanctioned by empirical investigation" (*DE*, 346). Taken together, these claims made on behalf of Dewey make it look like he believed in a conception of science and knowledge to which I argue he did not subscribe.

Let me begin my argument by reminding us of the nature of the hypotheses that are the instruments of Deweyan inquiry. These take the form "in this situation, with these circumstances, and this end, the action(s) most likely to lead to success is (are) X(Y, Z, ...)." Now, if such a hypothesis is confirmed, and then confirmed in other relevantly similar circumstances, what would the generalization look like? First, it would *not* be a "general, universal" claim. For Dewey has admonished us that confirmed hypotheses are not to be treated as dogmas, but as hypotheses. Second, Dewey argues in *Human Nature and Conduct* that "life is a moving affair in which old moral truth ceases to apply," and that "social situations alter," and therefore that "it is...foolish not to observe how old principles actually work under new conditions, and not to modify them so that they will be more effectual instruments in judging new cases."²⁸ We must understand Dewey as making the case for general rules of thumb, and not universal principles. There simply *are* no *verified* truths, only *warranted* ones. Furthermore, this goes for *all* types of inquiry, not just moral inquiry, for the reasons McCarthy herself acknowledges. Thus I believe McCarthy is right in claiming that for Dewey moral knowledge is no more or less secure than scientific knowledge (*DE*, 339). What I think we need to understand is that Dewey's pragmatism is a precursor to Thomas Kuhn's arguments in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to the effect that all knowledge is relative to our current paradigms, and we never know when a shift in that paradigm will make present knowledge into false beliefs.

CONCLUSION

What we can say, however, is what ethical inquiry ought to look like and therefore what characteristics the ethical inquirer ought to have. Inquiry must first begin in actual doubt, with the discovery of a problem to be investigated. Second, we ought to set out the various ends which we might want to attain. Third, we should consider the possible means-ends combinations, examining the evidence we have, both from the situation itself and from past experience, and taking as many perspectives as we can. Fourth, acting on our best hypothesis we should take note of how well our endeavors turn out, since this might be relevant in a future inquiry. In this way, we ensure that our inquiry has the best chance of generating a satisfactory resolution.

Dewey argued that these stages of inquiry required three characteristics on the part of the inquirer: Open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility.²⁹ If we add Dewey's further assumptions that inquiry is by its nature social, and that democratic forms of association are the political extension of his theory of inquiry we can develop the notion of inquiry even further.³⁰ However, these have implications for the meanings of the characteristics Dewey has identified. For example, open-mindedness has both an individual and a social meaning. On the one hand, if I am trying to solve my own isolated individual problem, it means that I have to keep my mind open to different possibilities for my own ends. On the other hand, if I am engaged in a social inquiry, then I must be open to possibilities based on ends suggested by the perspective of others as well as to their suggestions regarding data relevant to the inquiry. And, I need to be fair and respectful to those suggestions as well. All of these attitudes, in addition to the skills required by the method of inquiry, are what I have called the "requirements of democratic citizenry" characteristics that a citizen of a democracy committed to making the deliberative process meet moral standards must have.³¹ For reflection to occur at all, there needs to be doubt, which requires that we be undogmatic or skeptical. For our deliberations to be thorough and fair we need to be open-minded and whole-hearted. And for our past experiences to help us with present or future deliberations, we need to compare actual results with hypothesized results, allowing for flexibility in application. This, finally, means that the principles that we have generalized from our past experiences and the experiences of others must be held as guides to possible future experiences, not guarantees of them.

I believe that a Deweyan model of ethical inquiry ought to be used to develop curriculum in K-12 and higher education. First, to paraphrase Socrates, it is the height of wisdom to know one's own ignorance, and thus to be a lifelong inquirer ought to be the goal of every individual. Dewey's method of inquiry and the characteristics associated with it show us what that kind of life might look like. Dewey's writings also show us how values are natural parts of our environment, as well as how to improve and expand them, using past experiences as guides to the improvement of the future. Furthermore the necessity of inquiry forces us to participate in communal inquiries as to how we are to live together. Thus Dewey's corpus yields both personal and political methods for hypothesizing what one ought to do, and does so in such a way as to give us ways of empirically verifying those hypotheses, and thus of making progress as well. Education would do society a great service to inculcate such skills and attitudes in its citizens.

1. Anyone who doubts this should take a look at the debates between Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam on this very issue, as well as the volumes of secondary literature to their debates, which have been going on since the early 1980s.

2. Christine McCarthy, "Dewey's Ethics: Philosophy or Science?" *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (1999): 339-58. This article will be cited as *DE* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. See, for example, John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: The Modern Library, 1930), John Dewey and James Tufts, *Ethics*, 2d ed. (1932), ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985). I use the 1932 edition rather than the 1908 edition for two reasons. First, the

later version is significantly changed from the earlier (see Abraham Edel and Elizabeth Flower's introduction). Second, the reasons for the changes lie in Dewey's working out more fully the implications of his conceptions of experience and social psychology, most notably in *Human Nature and Conduct and Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958) and John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938).

4. Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 178-80.

5. Quoting John Dewey, *The Theory of the Moral Life* (1908; reprint, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 24.

6. John Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 280.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 191-99.

9. *Ibid.*, 193.

10. *Ibid.*, 173.

11. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 29, emphasis added.

12. See Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, chapter 1 and "The Quest for Certainty" in Boydston, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), esp. chaps. 7 and 8.

13. *Ibid.*, 4a.

14. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 44-5, for a brief discussion, and much of *Human Nature and Conduct* for a fuller exposition.

15. See Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, chap. 9.

16. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 32.

17. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 42.

18. Dewey, *How We Think*, 2d ed., in Boydston, *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 8, 120-21, and *Ethics*, 164.

19. Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 112.

20. *Ibid.*, 112.

21. Dewey, *How We Think*, 122; Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 190.

22. Dewey, *Theory of Valuation*, 221.

23. Citing John Dewey, "The Logic of Judgments of Practice," in *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York, Dover Publications, 1916), 335-442.

24. Dewey, *Theory of Valuation*, in Boydston, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 13, 189-251, 214.

25. Quoting Dewey, "The Field of 'Value,'" in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 16, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (1949, reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 343-57, 346-7.

26. Quoting Dewey, "The Field of Value," 347.

27. Quoting Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life*, 5.

28. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 239.

29. Dewey, *How We Think*, 136-39.

30. See Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, and *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1954).

31. See Matt Pamental, "What is it Like to be a Deliberative Democrat?" in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steve Tozer (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 222-30.