

Must Dewey Duel Dualisms Forever?

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Abstraction is one of the great wonders of the human mind. It is also a great troublemaker. Eric Bredo's "Organizational Theory and Ethics" is a wonderful example of abstraction. It also gets him in trouble, as I shall try to show in this response to his paper.

In the careful and deliberate manner that marks so much of his work, Bredo draws our attention to the ethical pitfalls of two dominant conceptions of organizational theory. One of these, the rational-bureaucratic, fails us because it is inattentive to the moral worth of the goals it sets, and to the incidental effects of pursuing these goals. The other theory, the organic-communal, suffers ethical deficiency because it often ignores the interests of groups distinct from, but related to, the primary community. It has the added problem of the primary community cohering so strongly around dominant views that it may ignore or subjugate minority views.

Bredo does us all a service when reminding us of the ethical dangers inherent in different views of organizational behavior. He is particularly incisive in illuminating the moral trouble spots of two widely held views of organizational behavior. Unfortunately his success in this regard derives from some questionable conceptual moves with the theories he critiques, as well as uncritical acceptance of the theory he extols.

Bredo argues that rational-bureaucratic theory and organic-communal theory are contesting theories of organizational behavior, although they share a disturbing tendency to foster unethical conduct. He proposes a third theory, one unfettered by the moral perils that beset the rational and organic theories. Examining the structure of Bredo's argument, one is reminded of a Greek tragedy, wherein the plot becomes so complex that the denouement can only be accomplished by lowering on ropes a god who miraculously resolves the plot. For Bredo, the *deus ex machina* is John Dewey, lowered into the contested terrain of rationalist bureaucrats and organic communitarians, offering a version of pragmatism as the morally compelling alternative to the other two ethically deficient theories. Pragmatism offers the resolution, contends Bredo, because of its sensitivity to context and situation, its focus on process, and its democratic underpinnings. It thereby avoids the ethical traps of the other two theories.

It would be well for me to confess at this point a certain suspicion of any attempts to cast pragmatism as the Viagra-equivalent for ethical dysfunction. Perhaps I have been too long in philosophy of education, for I have seen us leap from antidote to antidote, as we try to recover from poisons frequently self-concocted and self-administered. For many of my colleagues, pragmatism is the antidote *du jour*, particularly given the contemporary interest of theoreticians and researchers in practice rather than theory, and in action rather than abstraction. It is precisely on this point that I want to press a bit harder on the analysis offered by Bredo.

For his argument to work as he proposes, Bredo has to depend on a move he should not make. He has to depend on the reification of his two unacceptable organizational theories in order for them to have the ethical consequences he argues for. That is, he has to have material organizations that operate *in compliance with* these theories, if these theories are to be held accountable for the ethical failures he attributes to them. Without this reification, we find ourselves in the position of holding the *theory* accountable for the morality of organizational actors. To do so is to attribute enormous power to theory and extraordinary helplessness to actors.

A more realistic, and I think more illuminating, view is to understand the theory as an abstraction from the material organization, intended to explain some, much, or all of the workings of the organization, or to propose an alternative conception of how the organization might work. Doing so preserves the integrity of the organizational actors, whose conduct may be a composite of many theories, including pragmatic theory. Indeed, the actors may have no sense of their conduct as either based upon or driven by a theory. However, the abstraction is a useful way to explain a dominant trend of the organization and perhaps to reveal to the actors a way of thinking about their individual and collective conduct. With such a framework, one may picture, not a duel between the rationalists and communitarians, to be resolved by pragmatists, but a dialogue among the three that reveals salient features, identifies unintended consequences, and heightens discernment of ethical problems.

I take this position because I believe that the rational-bureaucratic and the organic-communal theories are valuable explanatory abstractions, and perhaps even useful forms for organizational life. In saying this I may be missing a key point that Bredo would wish me to understand. Although he does not state the point explicitly, his argument may hold that a pragmatic organizational theory is superior because it subsumes both the rational-bureaucratic and the organic-communal, without becoming heir to the ethical shortcomings of either of them. This is an interesting possibility, and one that, if argued successfully, would relieve Bredo's argument of some of the criticism here directed at it. However, Bredo casts the descriptions of the rational-bureaucratic and the organic-communal in ways that make them quite alien to the *ethos* of pragmatism, thereby implying that he views the Deweyan alternative as a fully-functioning replacement for clearly defective theoretical merchandise.

One final point: Bredo takes care to elicit for us the moral liabilities of the rational-bureaucratic and organic-communal theories, but says not a word about the potential moral perils of pragmatic theory. Is the correct inference from his absence of critique here that there are no moral problems in the pragmatic position? He is too good a philosopher to permit such an inference to stand, so one supposes that the strict page limit imposed upon him for this paper prevented the evenhanded treatment one wishes for in such cases. Still, it does seem as if his skeptical nature worked overtime on the rationalist and organic theories, and went on holiday for the pragmatic version.

What, then, to make of this effort overall? Bredo offers us an important topic for consideration, one that contains significant moral freight for educators. He addresses his topic with clear prose and a logic that is easily grasped, and for these gifts

we are in his debt. This clarity of logic and prose, however, is double-edged, as it eases the critic's burden by placing the argument's flaws well within the reader's field of vision. In his evident desire to construct an inviting scenario wherein two giants are competing for the souls of the organization, to be slain and replaced by the soul of John Dewey, he offers too simple a depiction of organizational theory, too flat a conception of organizational actors, and too restricted a conception of moral action in organizational settings. Moreover, he leaves us unformed of the moral shortcomings that may plague the Deweyan alternative.

Such difficulties well-illustrate the problems of attending too closely to the abstractions we academics find so enticing, while ignoring the agents "on the ground," as it were, whose sense of these abstractions may be nothing like ours. It is there, on the ground, where we must direct our concern for ethical conduct. I hope Eric Bredo will turn in that direction when he again takes up this important analysis.