

Getting Beyond the Intellectual Comfort Zone

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Francis Schrag suggests that opposing philosophies are more like differing attitudes than conflicting propositions. Since opposing attitudes do not conflict with regard to truth we are free to learn from a variety of them, even when they pull in different directions. John Dewey and Michael Oakeshott's views differ in this way, he suggests, Dewey being committed emotionally to eliminating deadening boundaries and Oakeshott to sustaining important divisions. We can learn from both of orientations, without concern for their truth or falsity, since they are good for different purposes. In the end, however, we are likely to find one or the other more acceptable because it fits our own purposes and temperaments. In fact, "both Dewey and Oakeshott would agree that to expect more from philosophy is naïve if not dangerous."

In responding to Schrag's claims I agree with much of what he says about the temperamental origin of different philosophies. I also think the contrast he draws between Dewey and Oakeshott is a good and important one. Rather than placing the sole emphasis on one's emotional response to a philosophy, however, I highlight the way emotional and cognitive considerations can, and should, work together in reaching such judgments.

The notion that different philosophies emerge, in fair part, from different emotional attitudes seems to quite correct. William James stated the point some time ago as follows:

The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments.... Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries, when philosophizing, to sink the fact of his temperament. Temperament is no conventionally recognized reason, so he urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions.... There arises thus a certain insincerity in our philosophic discussions ... (since) the potentest of all our premises is never mentioned.¹

I also agree that opposing attitudes are different from opposing truth claims. An attitude is an inclination to act in a certain way. A tendency to see things in terms of one kind of gestalt, for example, is in no logical conflict with a tendency to see them in terms of another. However, a philosophy is not *merely* an attitude. It may express an attitude but it consists of statements, some of which are likely to make truth claims. I may have a tendency to be paranoid and you may have a tendency to be trusting, these being two conflicting attitudes that in themselves make no truth claims. However, if I claim that you are acting against me, a claim I might find very reasonable given the evidence I have chosen to inspect, and you believe you were not acting against me in any way, our conflicting attitudes have resulted in conflicting truth claims.

While "opposing" philosophies may emerge from different attitudinal or temperamental biases they are much more than this. A philosophy, like any work of

art, has to be “worked out.” There is a struggle between one’s feelings and their application to the situation at hand. As a result emotional and cognitive considerations tend to be complexly intertwined, rather than one determining the other, as Schrag suggests. As Nelson Goodman suggests, rightness and truth are interdependent, although truth is a specific kind of rightness.² Stated less abstractly, the appropriateness of a scheme depends in part on the truth of the claims made when utilizing it, just as the truth of a proposition depends, in part, on the appropriateness of the scheme in which it functions. Part and whole inform one another, or at least should do so when reaching a well-considered judgment.

The charm and import of Schrag’s analysis lies primarily in his identification of a clear and important difference between Dewey and Oakeshott, based on their attitudes toward boundaries. This seems a good and fruitful way to compare them. Schrag is certainly right about Dewey’s attitude toward boundaries. To cite another example drawn from *School and Society*:

All waste is due to isolation. Organization is nothing but getting things into connection with one another, so that they work easily, flexibly, and fully. Therefore in speaking of this question of waste in education I desire to call your attention to the isolation of the various parts of the school system, to the lack of unity in the aims of education, to the lack of coherence in its studies and methods.³

Since continuity was so important in Dewey’s philosophy, as in those of the other pragmatists, some of the best criticisms highlight limitations arising from this value. Israel Scheffler’s criticisms of Dewey with regard to this are nicely summarized in Alan Phillips’s essay in *Insight*.⁴ As Donald and Barbara Arnstein put it, in a critical appreciation of Scheffler’s work: “Scientific ideas, Scheffler believed, transcend our practical environment and thereby enlarge the intellectual perspective of the student. Therefore, he repeated on three different occasions between 1956 and 1974, ‘the school ought to stand apart from life in a basic sense.’”⁵

Schrag suggests that a stronger sense of boundaries might be helpful in insulating schools from undesirable business influence. This is a good point. I would add that there are other reasons for seeking greater insulation, as well, such as enabling evolution to be taught forthrightly in rural townships and separating school from commercialized sport. Either way, I agree that focusing on Dewey’s dislike of discontinuity is a good way to begin a critique.

Finally, let’s consider what can be learned from “fundamentally antithetical” orientations like those of Dewey and Oakeshott. Schrag suggests that “Dewey’s map will open the eyes of those needing to be sensitized to the evils of compartmentalization,” while “Oakeshott’s map will alert readers to the perils resulting from heedless attempts to erode or eliminate all barriers.” He ends this passage with the suggestion that:

Each of us must be our own judge as to which philosopher’s orientation best permits us to identify the itinerary we, ourselves, wish to travel from our current location. Both Dewey and Oakeshott would agree that to expect more from philosophy is naïve if not dangerous.

I think there is more at stake than this, however. The principal difference between Dewey and Oakeshott may not be merely a generalized attitude toward boundaries.

The thing that really divides them seems to be a much more specific attitude toward eliminating or reinforcing boundaries and distinctions based on class and status. If this is true then the larger question beyond our own personal tastes concerns which direction of movement will result in a better society. I might have a personal taste for one attitude and still think that present social life more generally needs a nudge in the opposite direction.

There is also a temporal aspect to attitudes that Schrag does not take into account. I may prefer one approach today but change my mind tomorrow after having more experience with its consequences. If one can determine such consequences through experiment, as Charles Peirce and Dewey suggested, one has grounds for doing something other than merely adopting the immediately comfortable orientation.⁶ What are the effects of Deweyan progressive schools when compared to Oakeshottian academies for example? It seems quite possible that a Deweyan or Oakeshottian who experienced these consequences might reconsider aspects of their own philosophy. Put otherwise, while it is true that emotion drives cognition, it is equally true that cognitive judgments modify emotional reactions. This point, and the observation that there is a difference between what one prefers for oneself, and what one thinks best generally, is important corrections to Schrag's analysis. Among other things, they support the idea that Dewey expected more of philosophy than Schrag suggests.

1. William James, *Pragmatism and Other Essays* (1907) (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 6–7.

2. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Press, 1978).

3. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (1900) (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 71.

4. Alan G.J. Phillips, "Dewey, Scheffler and the Debate over Continuity," *Insights* 34, no. 1 (2001): 5–10.

5. Donald Arnstine and Barbara Arnstine, "Rationality and Democracy: A Critical Appreciation for Israel Scheffler's Philosophy of Education," *Synthese* 94 (1993): 38.

6. C.S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" (1877), in *Chance, Love, and Logic: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Morris R. Cohen (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), 7–31; and John Dewey, *Types of Thinking* (1922) (New York: Philosophical Library, 1984).